

Meet the Parents

The experience of students with children in further and higher education



national union of students

"This report and the underlying research sets out a clear picture of the challenges facing student parents. NUS should be congratulated for taking the lead on this issue and for undertaking the first UK-wide research on the experiences of this large and growing group of students. This report should provide a real stimulus to government, universities and colleges alike to work together to address the barriers to student parents entering and succeeding in tertiary education and help make lifelong learning a reality."

Chris Keates, General Secretary, NASUWT



Equality Challenge Unit

"This is a significant piece of research in a largely under-researched area. The findings provide compelling evidence of the lack of support and isolation that many student parents experience, and reveal that as a group they are at serious risk in terms of retention. The report has to make all of us working in the higher and further education sectors consider carefully how we can provide more effective support to student parents."

Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive, Equality Challenge Unit

NATIONAL CHILDCARE CAMPAIGN

**daycare
trust**

"NUS should be proud of this very thorough research report highlighting the struggles that student parents face. Daycare Trust campaigns for quality, affordable childcare for all and the lack of support for student parents is a real concern that we have lobbied on for some time. We fully support the policy recommendations in this report and hope to work with NUS on bringing about the changes student parents need."

Alison Garnham, Joint Chief Executive, Daycare Trust



"The NUS student parents report provides a fascinating insight into the lives of people attempting to combine being a parent with modern study and the problems that often make the experience a day to day struggle. Given the surprisingly limited data currently available on student parents it is certain to become an invaluable resource to advisers and campaigners alike."

Paul Norman, Membership Services Manager, MMUnion Student Advice Centre

Gingerbread
Single parents, equal families

"This is an incredibly useful report which really helps to illuminate the experience of student parents, many of whom are bringing up children alone. Many single parents want to study, but as this report outlines, more support is needed – particularly for those in further education. We look forward to working with NUS to help put the changes recommended by the report into practice."

Kate Bell, Head of Policy and Research, Gingerbread



"The Nuffield Foundation has, for many years, provided funds to student parents in further and higher education so that they would not be differentially disadvantaged by responsibility for family care. The NUS research in this report clearly identifies many of the gaps in a highly complex system that we have been attempting – in a small way – to plug, and the associated day-to-day issues that our grant-holders face. The recommendations set out here would go a long way to filling these gaps at a national level."

Josh Hillman, Assistant Director, The Nuffield Foundation



Queen's
Students'
Union

"QUB Students' Union welcomes this valuable piece of work. We see it as a prompt for HEIs to try and improve services to this group of students who are bringing up the next generation of participants in third level education."

Connie Craig, Student Advice Centre Manager, Queen's Students' Union



Photographs: Jenny Matthews

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Geraldine Smith
Sarah Wayman

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Foreword

Welcome to 'Meet the Parents', the first ever UK-wide report into the experiences of students with children in further and higher education.

Government efforts to widen participation and undertake welfare reform have led to an increase in the number of students with children. But our research has found that the practical measures and imaginative thinking required to respond to the needs of such students have not necessarily accompanied a rise in numbers. Student parents are trying to make the most of the opportunities available; they are an inspiring and hard-working group of learners, highly motivated by their family responsibilities and passionate about learning. Their determination to succeed is, however, constantly tested by a combination of obstructive policies, inaccessible institutional practices, and cultural assumptions about who 'students' are.

So who are student parents? Whilst research suggests that parents who study are more likely to be women, part-time and mature, it is also clear from our research that students with children are a diverse group. They can be mature or young learners; international or UK students; might access many forms of benefits and student support, or be eligible for none. We spoke to parents completing PhDs and those beginning level one courses, those who had never been to their students' union, and those who represented other students in sabbatical roles.

But more striking than the differences are the similarities in their experiences of education. This experience is a challenging one, with limited childcare funding available, complex student support arrangements, inaccessible teaching practices, and little or no time to take part in wider student life.

The ability of parents to participate and succeed in education is central to the success of the

Government's aims to end child poverty, raise employment, widen participation and increase skills. But just last year, Government cut institutional funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs), effectively pricing many women 'returners' – those who have taken time off to raise a family – out of higher education. 2008 also saw the Department for Work and Pensions announce moves to eradicate income support, and with it lone parents' rights to access further and higher education without having to also be 'available for work'.

Despite these obstacles, the students we spoke to were determined to succeed. Being a positive role model to their children is enormously important to many of those we spoke to. These students are using their time in education to embed learning into their family life, raising their children's aspirations and expectations in the process. The prospect of debt from participation in either further or higher education, in the form of tuition fees, course and childcare costs, means that the decision to enter education is not taken lightly. As a result, student parents feel they have more to lose if they fail.

For the reasons outlined here it is crucial that student parents receive the support they need to succeed. We hope that this report will encourage efforts – by government, institutions and students' unions – to enhance the experience of students with children in further and higher education.



Katie Curtis

National Women's
Officer, NUS



Ama Uzowuru

Vice President
(Welfare), NUS

Executive summary

Key findings

This research was carried out between November 2007 and December 2008. During this time we conducted 10 focus groups, speaking to 73 student parents in the UK between May and October 2008. We also carried out face-to-face interviews with 17 student advisors, academics and campaigners and conducted a survey of 2,167 student parents between October and December 2008.

- 1 Nobody knows exactly how many student parents there are because institutions are not required to collect this information. This in turn makes accurate allocations of resources or budgeting impossible. Collecting data on numbers of student parents is something that academics, advisors and students themselves felt would improve the ability of institutions and funding bodies to effectively support student parents.
- 2 Research suggests that the majority of student parents are women, mature and studying part-time. Our research also found that the vast majority of home students do not move to attend college or university (92 per cent of UK respondents). This can affect their experience significantly, in terms of choice of course and institution, travel time and costs, and levels of participation in wider student life.
- 3 There was a clear trend for many student parents to be studying on vocational courses, such as social care, health or education, with 42 per cent of our respondents having to do a placement as a compulsory part of their course. These students experience particular difficulties accessing registered childcare. Placements can change from term to term and may require overnight stays, when registered care is unavailable.
- 4 Student parents are hard-working and passionate about education, about improving their own and their children's educational and employment prospects and financial security, and about the positive impact that being a student parent had on both their academic achievement and on their relationships with their children and family life. Three quarters (75 per cent) of survey respondents felt that being a student parent had been a positive experience for them and their family; more than a third felt that being a student parent had helped them to be a good role model to their children.
- 5 Student parents consistently displayed genuine enthusiasm for their courses despite numerous real and perceived barriers to their full and successful participation in learning. The majority of these issues stemmed from the mismatch between traditional course organisation, including timetabling, holidays, deadlines, placements and group work and the needs of students with children.
- 6 Student parents are an at-risk group in terms of student retention, with 60 per cent of survey respondents having thought about leaving their course. This figure rises to 65 per cent for lone parents. Personal ambition and creating financial security for their children are two of the main reasons that student parents remain on their course. Staff in institutions are a vital swing factor in student parents' experience, with individuals often 'at the mercy of beneficent tutors'.
- 7 Little time, no money for additional childcare, and parenting responsibilities make it very difficult for student parents to get involved with student life outside their course. Timings of events, costs, alcohol and a lack of 'child-friendly' activities put additional obstacles in the way of student parents' engagement in the student community. One in ten say they feel isolated as a student with children.

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8 Students with children face considerable financial pressures due to a combination of insufficient childcare funding, lack of funding for associated course costs and reduced benefits. Lone parents are the 'poorest' group; they are more likely to apply for hardship funds, take on additional debt and are less able to work because of a lack of childcare support from a partner. Student parents feel guilty that their children 'go without' as a result of this.

9 There is no clear or consistent funding entitlement for student parents in either FE or HE. Funding depends on mode of study, sector, UK country, age and marital status. This severely financially disadvantages some groups of student parents compared with others. A significant proportion – 76 per cent – of our respondents received no childcare funding at all and only 11 per cent say they receive enough funding to cover their expenses.

10 Student parents are one of the few groups of students eligible for benefits whilst studying, but the complex interaction between benefits and student support presents a number of problems. Student parents need to be 'experts' about what they are entitled to, and agencies not communicating with each other can often lead to over and underpayments of benefits, leaving students with debts or in serious hardship. Students have to switch between benefits and student support several times a year.

11 Provision of information about childcare options and financial entitlements were found to be seriously lacking for students with children. Only 14 per cent felt that they had received sufficient information about childcare, and just 18 per cent felt they had received enough information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent.

12 Students with children face a number of difficulties accessing childcare which is suitable for their needs. The national shortage of childcare places, high costs, a shortfall in childcare funding of between 15 and 100 per cent for students across the board, and the flexibility required by most student parents combine to ensure that student parents are disadvantaged from the offset.

13 79 per cent of student parents we surveyed always, frequently or sometimes used family or friends for childcare in order to attend university or college; of those more than a third (37 per cent) use it exclusively. One in five of all respondents pay for it, despite no statutory funding being available for such care.

14 Half of all students with children have been late for, or have had to miss, a class because of problems with childcare; 16 per cent have received a library fine for the same reason. Lone parents are more likely to have missed lectures due to problems with childcare or child sickness.

15 Students are not considered to be 'good customers' for childcare providers. They often need irregular hours, at awkward times and are subject to last-minute changes and late provision of timetables. Providers may also have to wait for payment from statutory funding bodies.

Key recommendations

NUS has identified six areas where changes to policies, practices and attitudes would significantly enhance the experience of students with children in further and higher education. In this section we list our key recommendations under each of these areas. Each chapter of this report also concludes with a detailed set of recommendations for the consideration of Government, institutions and students' unions.

Data collection

1 The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) should make it a requirement for universities and colleges to collect data on the parental status of a student, to allow the annual UK-wide collection of statistics of student parent numbers in further education and higher education. It is recommended that the Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly also consider the collection of this information.

2 The Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) should use this data to inform calculations and allocations of funding for the Access to Learning Fund (ALF), the Learner Support Fund (LSF) and the Childcare Grant.

3 Regardless of a national requirement, institutions should collect this data at registration in order to enhance their ability to improve the support that both institutions and students' unions provide for student parents.

4 Institutions should use this data to embed a holistic, integrated system of support for student parents, to include detailed and timely information about services available and entitlements. Caring responsibilities must also be taken into account in relation to deadlines, extensions, library fines and attendance targets.

Teaching and learning

5 Universities and colleges should carry out impact assessments of their teaching and learning practices for student parents, including evaluating how their modes of study, deadline schedules, timetable provision and styles of learning either positively or

negatively impact student parents; institutions should also consider how such practices impact on their ability to fulfil the requirements of the gender duty.

Student activities

6 Students' unions should adopt 'child-friendly' practices, including establishing child-friendly areas in union buildings and a programme of activities in which parents and their children can participate.

7 Institutions and students' unions should ensure that relevant information and/or training is provided to all individuals who work with student parents. In students' unions this should include staff, officers, volunteers, student advisors and presidents of clubs and societies.

8 Institutions and students' unions should support the development of online or in-person networks of student parents, recognising the lack of time they have to establish these on their own.

9 Students' unions should consider the ways in which student parents' interests can be represented through their democratic systems, given the restraints on their time.

Funding

10 All students should have an *entitlement* to some level of childcare funding, regardless of age, mode of study, nationality or the sector in which they study.

11 The HE childcare grant should be increased to 100 per cent of childcare costs, extended to part-time students and to adult learners in FE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government should consider introducing an equivalent means-tested entitlement in Scotland.

12 Discretionary funding is vital to helping student parents overcome considerable financial hardship. As such, additional resource should be put into the Parental Learning Allowance, LSF, ALF and Support Fund to cover the additional childcare costs that student parents inevitably accrue, other than formal or registered childcare. Student nurses with children in Northern Ireland should also be entitled to apply for help via the Support Fund.

Childcare

13 DIUS and the Department of Health (DoH) should formally recognise the centrality of informal childcare as a positive and integral part of how parents are enabled to study, and make a commitment to supporting students who need to use such care to participate in education.

14 DIUS and DoH should produce a statement detailing how students with children will be supported in accessing childcare when they are on courses requiring overnight placements.

15 Institutions should provide detailed and accurate information about childcare provision in the local community for students with children.

16 Institutions should reimburse for any fines or costs related to late timetable provision or last-minute changes to timetable schedules.

17 Institutions should work with Family Information Services, local authorities and schools to explore how these agencies could work effectively together to provide childcare for staff and students in institutions.

Better information, advice and guidance

18 To achieve better joined up thinking, signposting and interaction between government departments responsible for student parents, there should be 'check-off systems' between, DIUS, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and DCSF. All three departments should consider the impacts on student parents in policy developments, and work together to mitigate negative impacts of these.

19 DIUS, the Student Loans Company (SLC) and the LSC should work together to produce accurate, reliable information for students with children covering both FE and HE. This should include dedicated staff, a centralised website and paper-based materials. Institutions should add to this to provide tailored information for prospective and current students with children.

20 DCSF should fund a student parent helpline, potentially as part of 'Parent Know How', the existing hub of information for everyone in a parenting role.

21 Every JobCentre should have at least one advisor who has been trained in the interactions between student support and benefits.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a UK-wide study into the experiences of students with children in further and higher education. The study was conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS). The report is the first of its kind in Britain. It draws on a number of earlier studies into different aspects of student parents' experiences of further or higher education in the UK to build a detailed, wide-ranging account of the realities of student life for parents. The study covers both full-time and part-time students at higher education institutions (HEI) and further education colleges (FEC), including the Open University (OU), participating in courses between levels 1–5. Home and international student parents took part, as did those from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The aim of the research was to investigate the day-to-day experiences of students with children across the UK, in order to devise strategies to equip government departments, institutions and students' unions with the tools they need to ensure a quality learning experience for student parents.

Research method

Research was carried out between November 2007 and December 2008 via:

- a literature review of existing research, policy and data which was circulated amongst a group of critical readers for review;
- seventeen face-to-face interviews with experts across the fields of academia, student advice, policy, campaigning and practice; see Appendix C for a full list;
- focus groups with 73 student parents in 10 further and higher education institutions across the UK; see Appendix D for details;
- an online survey of 2,167 students with children; see Appendix B. The survey questions were circulated with a group of critical readers who provided feedback and amendments;
- a 'roundtable' discussion, where our findings and analysis were discussed with a group of experts in the field; see Appendix E.

Each stage of the research built upon information gathered from the previous stage. The literature review and interviews with experts informed the design of the focus groups, the content of which subsequently influenced the questions asked in the online survey. The survey was not designed to be a representative sample in a quantitative sense, but to test the findings from focus groups with a broader sample in order to give an overview of how student parents experience further and higher education in the UK today. Whilst we were pleased with the high number of completed responses to the survey, the sample is disproportionately weighted in favour of HE students and we were disappointed not to have reached more FE students. However, the focus groups were weighted in favour of FE students, and the data we gathered from interviews and focus groups as well as the survey were remarkably similar across both sectors. Where differences emerged, we have discussed these. The roundtable discussion allowed us to test our findings, refine our ideas and discuss recommendations.

Structure of the report

The report is divided into five chapters. Chapter one briefly outlines the data that exist in relation to students with children and suggests the likely characteristics of the student population. Chapters two – five report the findings of the research in relation to four aspects of the student parent experience: teaching and learning, student life, finance and childcare. Each chapter begins with a summary of the findings and concludes with a set of recommendations. Our key findings and recommendations are listed in the Executive summary on pages 3–6.

Appendix A provides detailed information about student funding available for parents in further and higher education in the UK. Appendix B provides detailed survey results, and Appendices C–E list interviewees, focus groups and roundtable attendees.

Terminology

- Student parent – a student studying in further or higher education who has dependent child(ren). For the purposes of this report ‘children’ includes anyone up to the age of 18.
- Mature student – the HE sector recognises those who apply for their course once they are 21 (20 in Scotland) or above as ‘mature’. In FE, adult learners are those aged 20 or over. However, the chances of a parent having taken time out to have a family and be back in education by 21 are small. So, for the purposes of this study, we refer to ‘young’ student parents as those under 25 and ‘mature’ student parents as those over 25.
- Institution – further education college or higher education institution.
- For brevity, throughout the report we have at times referred to English funding bodies and departments. Unless otherwise stated, recommendations are usually applicable to the equivalent departments and bodies in the devolved administrations.

Policy context

The experience of students with children in further and higher education is influenced by a number of key national policy drivers related to child poverty and education. Central to these are government attempts to widen participation in both further and higher education, to increase skill levels in the UK population and to eradicate child poverty by raising employment amongst disadvantaged groups and reducing teenage pregnancy.

Who is responsible for student parents?

Numerous government departments govern the daily experiences of student parents. In England, for example, as students they fall under the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. As parents, their free pre-school childcare places, their children’s schools, SureStart and Children’s Information Centres fall under the Department for Children, Schools and Families. For those working part time, the childcare tax credit system is operated by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Students studying for vocational health-related courses are funded directly by the NHS Bursary, funded by the Department of Health. For those in receipt of income support and Job Seeker’s Allowance, particularly lone

parents, their benefits are administered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Widening Participation and the skills agenda

In 1997 the Dearing Committee published *Higher Education in a Learning Society*. Amongst suggestions as to how higher education should be funded, Dearing also recommended the further expansion of higher education and made a number of recommendations around **widening participation**, both in terms of increasing the absolute numbers in higher education and also the proportion of students from under-represented groups. Since then, ‘widening participation’ has been a focal point of education policy and a key feature of how institutions access funds from HEFCE. HEFCE has specific strategic aims around this agenda, and consequently there is increasing impetus on the sector to reach certain targets around participation and retention of specific groups, including mature and part-time learners.

In 2007 the report *Prosperity for all in the global economy – World Class Skills* by Lord Leitch shifted attention back on to the further education sector with emphasis being placed on the need to develop Britain into a world skills leader through increasing adult skills. Skills have been identified as essential to the UK’s position in the global economy as well as to achieving social justice and equality, and this vision relies heavily on the uptake of education and training, particularly in the further education sector. Lone parents, statistically the group most likely to have no qualifications and be unemployed, are a clear target group for this agenda.

Education funding

Over the last decade the notion that graduates should contribute to the costs of their education has taken firm root in government policy, and subsequently, legislation. In 1998 an upfront fee was introduced, and in 2004 variable fees were enacted through the *Higher Education Act*. With this came the requirement that institutions use additional fee income for bursaries for students from disadvantaged groups where they charge above the 1998 fee, though reports of chronic under-spends of such money have prompted questions as to whether these have been distributed and accessed effectively.² In 2009 the higher education funding review will consider, amongst other things, whether or not to raise the limit on variable fees.

Since 1997 funding for further education has increased significantly alongside Government initiatives including an extended entitlement and targeted projects that have increased participation amongst disadvantaged learners. In 2000, when the **Learning and Skills Council (LSC)** was established, **Learner Support Funds** were introduced and remain to this day the main source of discretionary childcare funding for adult learners in further education.

Ending child poverty

Education policy in both further and higher education has, over the last ten years, increased the focus on students who are more likely to have children than 'traditional' students. The government's commitment to **eradicate child poverty by 2020** has had a similar effect. The government's strategy to focus on the causes of poverty, in particular by raising employment levels and prospects amongst disadvantaged groups, has involved initiatives aimed at the increased participation of such groups in further and higher education with the assistance of projects such as **Sure Start**. The successes of Sure Start programmes have subsequently seen the expansion of the programme via the development of **Children's Centres**, which are set to be a key locus for the provision of information about educational opportunities for lone and teenage parents. The connective tissue of many of these initiatives is the **Every Child Matters** framework, which seeks to encourage more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families, and places a special focus on agencies working together for the benefit of children.

Welfare reform

One of the biggest impacts of the child poverty commitment has been Labour's intense focus on raising employment levels for lone parents. There is no doubt that lone parents' – and more widely mothers' – engagement in employment reduces poverty, and that the government sees **Welfare to Work** as key to ending child poverty. Related initiatives began in 1998 with **New Deal for Lone Parents** with its aim of increasing lone parents' employment rate to 70 per cent by 2010. As a result of these initiatives, employment of lone parents has risen 12 per cent over the last decade.

The latest legislative reforms are included in the

government's White Paper, **Raising Expectations and Increasing Support** which states the government's aim to increase the overall employment rate to 80 per cent through tackling the unemployment of 'hard-to-reach' groups. Reforms have already reduced lone parents' entitlement to income support whilst in education, forcing them to claim Job Seeker's Allowance instead, meaning they will have to be 'available to work'. This puts the possibility of any sustained period of time in education in jeopardy.

Childcare

The levels of employment aspired to by the government inevitably puts further demands on the childcare sector to create yet more spaces for children as parents return to education or work. The government's recognition of this is illustrated through their development of a ten-year **Childcare Strategy** in 2004, recognising the need for choice, flexibility, availability, quality and affordability to allow parents to return to the workplace. This was entrenched in the 2006 **Childcare Act** which places a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient childcare to enable parents to work, or to undertake education and training leading to work. In 2008, the Government announced an investment of £100 million over three years to extend the offer of free education and childcare to 20,000 2 year olds in the most disadvantaged communities. Recently, the **Extended Schools** programme has increased the focus on 'wrap-around' childcare in primary schools, with a commitment to core provision in every school by 2010.

Childcare funding

The introduction of the means-tested Childcare Grant for HE students in 2001 and Care to Learn funding for young FE learners following the launch of the **Teenage Pregnancy Strategy** in 1999 are both indications that funding has become more generous for students over the last decade. However, there are still no clear or consistent entitlements for students requiring childcare across UK. There has also been a steady diminution in the Access to Learning Fund, directly affecting those parents unable to claim the **Childcare Grant (CCG)**. The only group of students that do have a blanket entitlement to childcare are FE student parents under the age of 20 through the **Care to Learn** programme.

1. Who are student parents?





Summary

There is no authoritative data about the number of student parents in either further or higher education, or about the characteristics of the student parent population. This is because institutions are not required to collect this data by HESA or the LSC. What we do know, based on our own and existing research – including government surveys – is that:

- around a third of part-time students in further and higher education are parents; this figure drops to approximately 7 per cent for full-time students in HE and may rise to as high as 40 per cent in FE; proportions of postgraduate students with children are not known;
- research indicates that students with children tend to be women, mature and part-time;
- a significant minority of student with children are lone parents; one third of our survey respondents and a quarter of all households are headed by a lone parent;
- student parents tend not to move to attend university or college, and may have caring responsibilities other than to their children;
- students with children are likely to be overrepresented on vocational and professional courses, particularly those allied to medicine and education;
- pregnant students face particular challenges in the educational system, particularly in relation to finances and taking time out.

The lack of data about students with children seriously limits the ability of either sector to meaningfully support student parents, and means that resource allocation is based on estimates. Collection of monitoring data about students with children is widely supported:

- a significant number of interviewees advocated the collection of this data in order to facilitate targeted support of student parents, some of whom felt that this would be the change that would make the biggest difference over all;
- students with children that we spoke to felt comfortable about this data being collected in order to improve support.

Research findings

When we started this project we began by asking two key questions. How many students have children? And what type of people are student parents? We were surprised to find that this information is not readily available.

How many students have children?

The simple answer to this question is that nobody knows. There is no authoritative data on the numbers of students with children in either further or higher education.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) information, which forms the central dataset for students in higher education, is based on data collected by the Universities College and Admissions Service (UCAS). UCAS does not at present ask about dependent children on its application form and HESA does not require individual universities to collect any data on students with dependents on entry, or those who become pregnant during their study.

The picture is similar in further education where comparable data is collected through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), which does not at present ask whether a learner has children. Colleges, like universities, are not required to collect this information, and indications are that few do: in a 2005 study, for example, researchers found that only one FE college among several in East London recorded the number of lone parents in their student body.³

That said, it is possible to make an approximate estimate of the size of the student parent population based on indications from government surveys and funding-related statistics (see Table 1). These suggest that in HE, between five and eight per cent of full-time undergraduates are student parents, and just over a third are part-time students. We did not come across any estimates of the postgraduate student parent population. In FE, estimates vary more significantly but seem to suggest a considerably higher concentration of student parents studying full-time, with a similar proportion of part-time students to HE.⁴

Social characteristics of the student parent population

In as much as it is impossible to accurately measure the social characteristics of students with children for the reasons outlined above, our research – in combination with existing surveys – does give us some clues as to who student parents are. These sources suggest that the majority of student parents are women, mature students, studying part-time, and that a significant minority are lone parents. These factors act singly and in combination to shape the experience of students with children – often to their disadvantage.

Women

The majority of respondents to our survey were women; they represented 87 per cent of the total compared to 12 per cent men. In our focus groups, we had a slightly lower proportion of men at around 9 per cent. Additionally, student advisors often referred to parents as 'she' when giving examples of their experiences. One advisor specifically picked up on this and said, "I know I keep saying 'she', but it really is women we are mainly talking about."¹⁴

Our research reflects the data currently available, which gives a clear indication that the majority of student parents (with primary responsibility for caring) are women. Labour Force Survey data suggests that, in FE, 35 per cent of women learning full-time have dependents under 16, compared to only 13 per cent of men.¹⁵ Care to Learn statistics report an even wider disparity with only 1 per cent of applicants for funding being male.¹⁶ In a sample of 71 student parents at Brunel University, 70 per cent of respondents were women.¹⁷ The Scottish Income and Expenditure Survey found that 12 per cent of women students were parents compared with 2 per cent of male students, and 87 per cent of students with dependent children were women.¹⁸ These figures reflect the fact that primary caring responsibilities still fall disproportionately to women.¹⁹

The literature suggests that gender is significant in terms of student parents' experiences of further and

higher education. Numerous studies have shown that women are more likely to leave education because of their domestic commitments than men, that they are more likely to feel conflict between their domestic and academic responsibilities, more likely to receive negative reactions from their partners for being on a course and that they receive less support from partners and families

than student fathers do.²⁰ Our own survey suggested differences too.²¹ Women respondents were less likely than men to move in order to attend college or university (11 per cent compared with 25 per cent), less likely to engage in paid employment during term time (39 per cent compared with 55 per cent), and more likely to apply for discretionary funds (22 per cent

Table 1: Estimated student numbers by year, country and mode of study

Source	Year	Estimated number of student parents (% of student population)		Coverage
		Full-time	Part-time	
HIGHER EDUCATION (undergraduates)				
DfEE Research Report ⁵	1998/99	5%	–	UK
DfES/NAW Research Report ⁶	2004/05	7%	37%	England
DfES/NAW Research Report ⁷	2004/05	6%	38%	Wales
Scottish Government Research Report ⁸	2004/05	8%		Scotland
DELNI Research Report ⁹	2004/05	5%	35%	Northern Ireland
Childcare Grants/Dependents' allowance allocated	2003/04	18,000*		England and Wales
FURTHER EDUCATION				
Care 2 Learn Evaluation ¹⁰	2006/07	6,739**		England
Scottish Government Research Report ¹¹	2004/05	12%		Scotland
Labour Force Survey ^{12 ***}	2007	24.4%	39.9%	England

* This is the total number of people who claimed means-tested allowances for childcare or dependents, and therefore includes carers of adults as well as carers of children.¹³

** This is the total number of students under 20 who accessed this funding in 2006/07. Whilst the majority of these will be based in FE colleges, the funding is available for anyone under 20, so this figure includes parents studying in schools.

*** The data includes parents in further education and sixth form colleges.

compared with 31 per cent). The survey results also suggest that men may be less likely to be affected by childcare problems: 39 per cent have been late for a lecture because of childcare difficulties, compared with 51 per cent of women respondents. They are more likely to find tutors supportive of their circumstances (47 per cent compared with 37 per cent), and find it easier than women to get involved with university and college life (35 per cent compared with 20 per cent). Crucially, women are more likely to consider giving up their course – although the figure is still unacceptably high for male student parents (62 per cent compared with 44 per cent).

The fact that the majority of students with children are women is also significant from a policy perspective, since it calls into play equalities legislation which protects women from direct and indirect discrimination. Institutions are bound by the gender equality duty, for example, which requires them to take steps to actively promote equality between men and women students. The forthcoming Equality Bill, which aims to harmonise existing equality legislation, could bring further imperatives in this area.

Lone parents

One quarter of all families with children is headed by a lone parent, and 34 per cent of survey respondents said they lived alone with their children. Student advisors that we spoke to highlighted lone parents as the group of parents they were most likely to see, suggesting that this is a group who present with more problems as a result of combining parenthood and study. Gingerbread has found the largest barrier to lone parents accessing education and training to be a lack of available childcare, due in part to the absence of another parent to share caring responsibilities with. This was followed by financial problems relating to childcare costs and fees,²² lone parents having overtaken pensioners as the poorest group in recent years.²³ Lone parents, academics and advisors that we spoke to suggested that their financial burden can be further complicated by maintenance payments not being made by ex-partners. Support of (ex) partners was highlighted as an important feature of academic success by many student parents in focus groups, and something that lone parents often do not have.

As a group, lone parents are more likely to be living

in poverty, not engaged in paid employment and more lacking in qualifications than other families.²⁴

Consequently, they are a key target of government policy in relation to widening participation, welfare and employment. In 1998 the Labour government set a 70 per cent employment target for lone parents by 2010, as part of a wider strategy which sought to end child poverty by 2020 through focusing on the causes of poverty and worklessness. This target engendered a number of different initiatives, including the New Deal for Lone Parents, Sure Start and the Childcare Strategy. Recently, in a bid to reach this target, pressure on lone parents through welfare reform has increased exponentially. During the time it has taken to research this report, the government has enacted legislation which strips lone parents in further and higher education of their entitlement to income support during vacations. This is part a series of reforms that aim to force lone parents with young children back into work through withdrawal of benefits. The impact of this is explored further in the 'Money matters' chapter.

Mature students

The majority of student parents we spoke to were 'mature' students, with 89 per cent of our sample being over the age of 25, and 45 per cent having been out of education for more than five years. Mature students also made up the majority of our focus groups. The interruptions to parents' education brought about by pregnancy and raising children – often in combination with other caring responsibilities – perhaps make this age profile unsurprising.²⁵

However, the 'young' student parent is a significant minority – more than one in ten of our survey respondents were under 25 years of age. In 2007/08 Care to Learn funding was provided to 6,739 young parents in FE in England alone.

Our research found that younger parents often had different experiences to older parents. Interviewees commented on the 'relative invisibility' of young parents, both in terms of policy and practice – often due to the conflation of student parents with mature students. One interviewee suggested that the lack of data about young parents is due to them 'falling between two groups', being neither 'traditional' students nor 'mature' students, and this was backed up by what we heard from young parents in our focus groups. Negative

Table 2: Age profile of survey respondents

Age*	Number	Percentage
Under 20	39	1.8
20–25	208	9.6
26–30	337	15.6
31–35	419	19.3
36–40	502	23.2
41–45	364	16.8
46–50	209	9.6
51–55	61	2.8
56–60	8	0.4
Over 60	4	0.2
Unknown	16	0.7
Total	2167	100

*as of 31/12/08

discourses about teenage parenthood prevalent in society may also lead to them not identifying as willingly as parents, and consequently them not necessarily getting the support they need.

Part-time students

As we have noted already, the data that is available on student parents suggests that the majority who are studying are doing so part-time – in both sectors. Part-time students currently account for 39 per cent of higher education.²⁶ This mode of study has seen considerable growth over the last decade, with the number of part-time students growing at three times the rate of full-time students.²⁷ Given the effort dedicated to widening participation during the same timeframe, and the appeal of part-time courses to ‘non-traditional’ students such as those with families to support,²⁸ it is likely that among that number will be a significant number of student parents. We know for example that in HE 62 per cent of part-time students are women, and 82 per cent are aged over 25 – two characteristics shared by students with children.

It is specifically in higher education that part-time

students are so significantly disadvantaged in comparison with their full-time counterparts. Not only do they receive less in the way of course and fee grants, but parents in England are not eligible for the Childcare Grant.

Our focus groups highlighted that student parents in both sectors make decisions over whether to study part-time or full-time based on a range of factors, some of which may change during the course of their study. Some choose to study part-time to allow them to work, others because of the guilt associated with spending time away from the family, and yet others make decisions based on benefit entitlement. Others choose full-time study to access statutory childcare funding or to minimise their time living in financial hardship. Funding models do not currently make it easy for students to switch between full and part-time study, and this is particularly problematic for students with dependents, who make decisions about their mode of study based not only on their preference but also their responsibilities as a parent.

On vocational courses

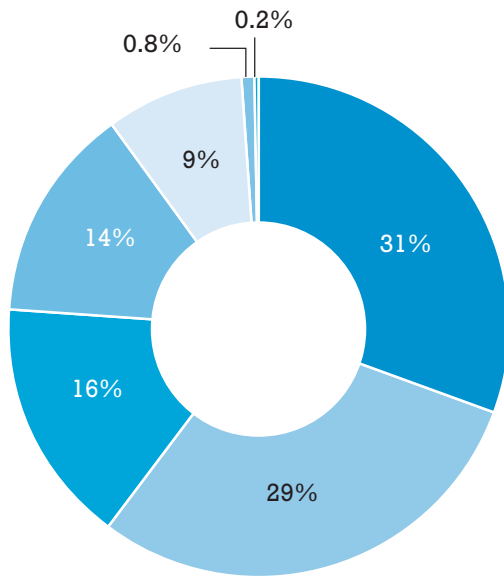
Considering the centrality of caring to many of their lives, it is perhaps unsurprising that interviewees all over the country stated that student parents tended to be clustered in vocational courses, such as social work, healthcare or teaching. The perception of higher student support during the course, and a more secure career at the end of it, were identified by student parents we spoke to as further motivations to follow vocational courses. In our focus groups (25 per cent) of students were studying on a vocational course and 42 per cent of our survey respondents were on a course that required them to do a placement.

Settled

Out of those surveyed from the UK, 92 per cent were attending colleges or universities near where they lived. Advisors we spoke to agreed that the student parents they saw were likely to be drawn from the local population, rather than having moved to the town or city to study (with international students being the notable exception).

This means that student parents are much more likely to be living in their own home, as opposed to university accommodation or with parents (only 5 per cent of our

Survey question: Before your current course, how long ago was it that you were last in education?



- Never 0.2%
- 0-1 years 31%
- 1-2 years 9%
- 2-5 years 14%
- 5-10 years 16%
- More than 10 years 29%
- Skipped question 0.8%

sample). It was highlighted by interviewees that student parents are more likely to have mortgages or live in suburban areas, and that this physical distance can add to their experiential difference and can lead to many student parents feeling 'out of touch' with other students.

For those who do have to move – 12 per cent of our total sample – the challenge is to find suitable, affordable family accommodation near to their institution. For international students in particular, this kind of accommodation is critical to the quality of their student experience.

Potential parents

Some students become parents for the first time, or become parents again, during their course of study. In our sample, 61 per cent had more than one child, and inevitably there will be women who are pregnant

at some point during their education as well as expectant fathers. There is currently no legal safeguard for pregnant students by way of maternity or paternity rights, such as parental leave, and funding mechanisms are not set up to deal with interruptions to study of this nature. We also heard about instances of outright discrimination against pregnant women by colleges and universities, including institutions refusing to enrol pregnant students because of fears that they would not complete the course.

One student advisor emphasised that those who become pregnant during their studies need a great deal of support because of the dramatic change that they experience in relation to being a student. This is particularly significant in terms of their finances, which can go from one or two sources of student income to a myriad of benefits, grants and loans.

The case for data collection

“[Without data on student parents], you can’t cost it, you can’t evaluate it, and universities and colleges don’t know what they can afford.”
Hilary Land (Interview 22/09/08)

“It is impossible to know what childcare needs students with children have because there is no data on them.” Claire Callender
(Interview 21/02/08)

Our survey data is not weighted to offer a representative sample of student parents – this is because there is no central source of national data on student parents in either further or higher education to weight it against. This was an issue that student advisors and academics raised frequently in our interviews as a significant barrier to research about this group and, as a consequence, to providing the support services they need. They also emphasised the beneficial impact accurate data would have in terms of helping the widening participation agenda and allocation of discretionary funds. Some student advisors felt this would be the change that would make the biggest difference to student parents overall.

Generally, those student parents we spoke to said they felt comfortable about this information being collected:

“I don’t mind being identified, in fact, I would like it!” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

“I think it would be really useful if, when you fill out your application form, you could indicate that you are a parent so the university could send us information that is relevant to us. I think that would be quite useful.” Student parent, London South Bank University

“My lecturer knows about me being a parent, and that helps.” Student parent, University of Leeds

The case for monitoring personal characteristics within the student population has already been won in relation to, for example, ethnicity and gender, and the data collected by HESA and the LSC are robust and of a high quality. This has allowed for targeted funding and policy work to specifically address the needs of underrepresented groups. In higher education this data has fed into the National Student Survey (NSS), providing important insights into the experiences of particular groups of students. The fact that no robust dataset exists in either sector for student parents therefore has serious implications for the ability of either sector to respond to the needs of this cohort of students in a meaningful and consistent way. Such data would undoubtedly be valuable in measuring the growth of this constituency over time, in assessing the relative dedication of resources such as the Learner Support Fund (LSF) or the Access to Learning Fund (ALF), and in gauging the success of widening participation initiatives. For these reasons the collection of such data is generally advocated by academics and practitioners in this field.²⁹

Recommendations

“I feel universities *should* ask students if they have children.” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

- HESA and the LSC should require institutions to collect information on whether a student has dependent children, as well as the number and age of children, as part of routine data capture for incoming students.
- DIUS should use this data to inform resource allocation for institutions.
- DIUS should commit to publishing annual statistics on student parents and to funding longitudinal research documenting the experiences of students with children in both further and higher education.
- Institutions should begin to collect this information at registration, regardless of a requirement from funding bodies.
- Institutions should use this data to proactively target support at students with children, and to monitor the attainment and retention of students with children.
- Institutions should also use this information to ensure they are providing adequate levels of family housing for both UK and international students.
- Institutions should consider whether they are fulfilling their requirements under sex discrimination legislation in relation to students with children, the majority of whom are women.

2. Teaching and learning





Summary

'I have just loved it here. I have met fab people and the course has been great. I have more experience and better prospects – I haven't got anything bad to say... it's been the best thing I have ever done.' Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

It was when we spoke to student parents about their experiences of teaching and learning that our focus groups became most animated. The majority of participants were passionate about education, about improving their own and their children's educational prospects and financial security, and about the positive impact that being a student parent had on both their academic achievement and on their relationships with their children and family life:

- three quarters of survey respondents felt that being a student parent had been a positive experience for them and their family;
- over a third felt that being a student parent had helped them to be a good role model to their children;
- 58 per cent of student parents who have thought about giving up their course cited the desire to create financial security for their families as one of their main motivations for staying.

There are a number of factors which affect when and where students with caring responsibilities study, as well as what they study:

- student parents are less likely to move to attend college or university, which can result in students having to travel considerable distances to attend an institution;
- student parents select their courses for a range of different reasons, including interest in the subject or job prospects. However their course choices are also likely to be constrained by what courses are available locally;
- 39 per cent of student parents felt unable to access learning resources at their institution as much as they need to, because of a lack of childcare or because of the high costs of travelling to their institution;
- parents often feel guilty about spending any more time away from their home and their children than is absolutely necessary;

continues overleaf...

Summary (continued)

- 59 per cent of student parents surveyed said that one of the main times that they studied was after 10 o'clock at night after their children had gone to bed;
- because of the difficulties of studying at home for many students with children, class time is particularly valued by this group of students.

Difficulties with course organisation, finances and a lack of support and information make student parents a high-risk group in terms of retention: 65 per cent of lone parents and 60 per cent of parents overall in our survey have thought about leaving their course. However, they consistently displayed genuine enthusiasm for their courses despite numerous real and perceived barriers to their full and successful participation in learning. The majority of these issues stemmed from the mismatch between traditional course organisation, including timetabling, holidays, deadlines and group work, and the needs of students with children:

- early provision of timetables is critical for students with children who need to arrange suitable childcare. Over a third of all survey respondents

received their timetable on the first day of term or after the start of term, and just under half (43 per cent) felt that this was not provided early enough for them to make adequate childcare arrangements;

- the timing of the school day, school holidays, inset days and child sickness can all pose problems for students with children, who because of these factors are likely to need to miss occasional lessons, arrive late or leave early
- students with children can sometimes be unfairly penalised by strict attendance targets which do not take into account their circumstances;
- for the same reasons students with children may need extra support to meet deadlines and participate in group work;
- supportive tutors and non-teaching staff can have a significant impact on the attainment and retention of student parents, as can negative experiences with staff;
- students who become pregnant are often expected to defer rather than to continue with their studies. 59 per cent of respondents who have been pregnant while studying did not feel supported by their college or university.

Research findings

Motivations to study

The student parents we surveyed and spoke to in focus groups were motivated to enter education by a range of factors. The most common of these included being a good role model to their children, increasing the financial security of their family now and in the future, developing a more fulfilling career and interest in the subject. Others, particularly lone parents, felt that participation in education would help them to combat the negative stereotypes they felt they were subjected to. For others still, further or higher education was something that they had always wanted to do but had not had the chance to earlier in life for a variety of reasons. These factors acted singly or in combination for different student parents.

Being a good role model

Setting a good example to their children was the main motivation in returning to education for 42 per cent of survey respondents³⁰ and more than a third (34 per cent) felt that studying had helped them to do so. A significant number of focus group participants discussed how important this motivating factor was to them:

“It is to show my daughter that I am securing our future, and making her realise that no matter what age you are, you are never too old for education.” Student parent, London South Bank University

“I think it’s good for the children. It shows them you’re not sitting on your backside – you’re being a bit of role model and you’re prepared to do something. You want to get out there and make something of yourself – lead by example.” Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

Students discussed wanting to broaden their children's horizons and change their educational aspirations by normalising further and higher education in their family environment. This was particularly noticeable amongst students who were the first in their family to participate in further or higher education:

“My daughter's four. If you said to her 'where are you going after nursery?' she says, 'school'. 'Where are you going after school?' 'I'm going to college'. 'Where are you going after college?' 'My mum says I have got to go to uni!' It's going to be standard.” Student parent, London South Bank University

Financial security

Parents were not only concerned about raising their children's educational aspirations, but also about creating financial security and stability for themselves and their families. This was a significant motivating factor for many of these students; 50 per cent of survey respondents said that one of their main motivations for entering education was to improve their earning potential. For 58 per cent, creating financial security for their children in the future motivated them to keep studying (this figure was higher for lone parents at 67 per cent). Students in focus groups spoke of wanting to improve their children's future by giving them “the best possible start in life”:

“The main reason I chose law is because I would like a well-paid job at the end to be able to provide for my son as best I can.” Student parent, University of Leeds

One parent described how poverty had motivated her to study:

“The reason I am here today at college is so that I can get a future, a career and provide my girls with the life they want, so I can buy what I need for them without struggling.” Student parent, Leicester College

A fulfilling career

Many of the student parents we spoke to in focus groups felt that without qualifications in further or higher education they would get stuck, “at the bottom of the rung” in low-paying, low-status jobs. A large number of survey respondents – 53 per cent – were also highly motivated by the desire to build or develop a career which was fulfilling. Many of those we spoke to were unhappy with their current situations and were hoping to get “decent” work at the end of their studies. This was often what kept them motivated when times got tough:

“My son's in school full-time now and I could be working full-time (and earning more). But I'm not doing that because I want a career and not just a job.” Student parent, 20, Leicester College

Student parents' personal ambitions also came into play: different students talked about “realising my potential”, “doing well”, and “wanting to be somebody”. ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) students we spoke to at Hackney Community College were keen to get into the employment market, as they had worked in their own countries and wanted to do so in the UK. Most were learning English so that they could take part in fulfilling paid employment.

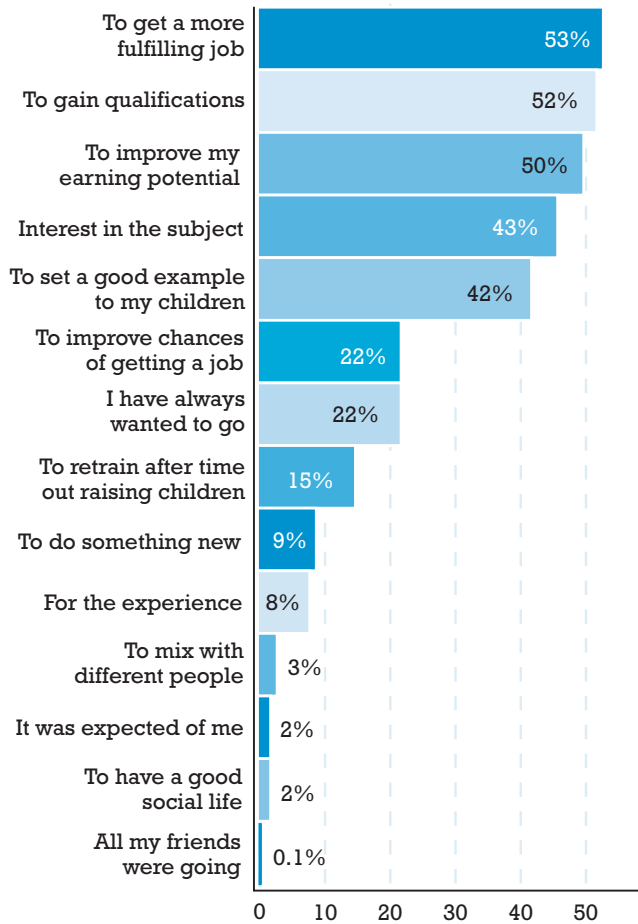
Interest in the subject

Interest in the subject was the main motivation to study for 46 per cent of student parents we surveyed. Many students in focus groups spoke passionately about their courses and the impact of learning on them personally:

“The course, the facilities and the tutors are fantastic and it's really opened my eyes to a whole new world and way of thinking.” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

“The level of the work and the commitment needed to achieve good marks was stimulating, challenging and rewarding.” Student parent, South East Regional College

Survey question: What were your main motivations for choosing to go into further or higher education?



Students talked about the transformative nature of their participation in education; it was described variously as “rewarding”, “beneficial” and “a privilege”. One woman talked about the “exceptional quality” of her course, and another said the best thing about being a student was “being able to learn, and having the freedom to learn”.

Combating stereotypes

Some single mothers that we spoke to in focus groups felt particularly affected by negative discourses around lone parenthood and benefits. They were keen to demonstrate that they were working hard to “better themselves”, and to emphasise that the reason they were studying was so that they wouldn’t have to depend on benefits in the future:

“We are all here to better ourselves and not just be just another unemployment statistic.”

Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

One single mother said that the reason she carried on in her course, even though it made her life very difficult, was:

“To give the example to my children that it is not normal to spend your life on the dole, with no prospects or contribution to society – and when things are really hard you don't give up, you try to find support to help you succeed.”

Student parent, University of Ulster

A number of participants also talked to us about passing on lessons about the importance of hard work to their children:

“As a single parent I could have sat around all day and lived off benefits, but I don't see the point in that. Although uni can be very stressful, I think I would have been more unhappy if I hadn't been doing something to improve my prospects in addition to raising my kids. It sets a good example for them – I want them to see me doing something with my life.” Student parent, University of Leeds

Last chances

For some older parents, there was a real sense that this was their “last chance” in education. For 22 per cent of survey respondents one of their main motivations in choosing to study was that “they had always wanted to go” to university or college. One woman who had left school young without qualifications spoke of the need to prove to herself and her children that she “wasn’t stupid”.

The impact of learning on the family

Improving confidence and raising aspirations

Several students talked to us about the impact that participation in further or higher education had on their confidence:

“I couldn’t do this a couple of months ago. I couldn’t talk in front of a group of people. I was too shy. So it’s really helped my confidence.” Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

“I think I have been busier and happier this year than I have been in a long time.” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

Several also discussed the impact of their learning on both younger and older children. We spoke to students who were studying at the same college or university as their children, and even one young grandparent whose daughter had decided to attend college on seeing her mother successfully complete a course at the same time as caring for her younger children. Others described studying with their children “around the kitchen table”, being “study buddies”, and being able to help their children with their homework:

“My daughter’s alright about it (me being at college), because things that I have learnt here I have been able to show her at school, so she’s doing better as well. It’s been good for both of us really.” Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

Some student parents said that going to college or university had actually improved their relationship with their children:

“I feel a different person when I come home [from university], more creative, buoyant and invigorated, and this influences my children’s reactions. I play and enthuse more after a day in college and I want them to learn, as I am, that education is and can be fun.” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

Children’s pride in their parent’s achievements was evident from many of the parents we spoke to. Several HE students talked about how excited their children were about attending graduation ceremonies, and one FE student – with no prior qualifications – described how excited her children were when she received certificates for her course.

Juggling responsibilities

Whilst participation in education can and does have positive impacts on the life of the family, it can be more difficult for some to adjust to the changes brought about by a parent becoming a student. When we asked survey respondents what they felt as a result of combining parenthood with studying, the most popular answer – selected by 58 per cent of respondents³¹ – was ‘guilty for not spending enough time with my children’. 37 per cent felt guilty for not spending enough time on their studies because of their caring responsibilities:

“It was the juggling and guilt over what I felt I should have been doing as a parent which was the most stressful thing to cope with.” Student parent, South East Regional College

“I feel guilty when I focus on my studies for not paying the children enough attention, yet when I concentrate on the children I am aware that I am neglecting my studies.” Student parent, University of Leeds

Some parents in focus groups said their children resented the time that they spent studying, and that younger children in particular found it difficult to understand why they couldn’t spend time with their parent when they were studying. Some felt that their relationship with their children had changed since becoming a student because they had less time than before to spend with them:

“I came home on Friday and this post-it note was stuck to my computer by my seven-year-old daughter that said ‘Don’t go on the computer!’ That horrified me – I thought ‘Do I go on the computer that much?’” Student parent, Norwich City College

Several students pointed out how difficult it was to strike a balance between home life and studying, particularly when they needed to do most of their studying in the home. They highlighted the comparison with paid employment, where it is easier for parents to demarcate boundaries between work and home life as employment usually takes them outside of the home.

What student parents study and why

As mentioned in the previous section, 46 per cent of students we surveyed said they were motivated to study by their interest in the subject. However, there are other factors which come into play for many student parents when selecting a course. These include the likelihood of the course leading to secure employment, the different levels of student support attached to different courses, where they live and the extent to which they are able to access information, advice and guidance. Whether a student parent studies full or part-time is also affected by a range of factors connected to their responsibilities as a carer.

Vocational courses

Only one or two students in focus groups said that their family responsibilities did not affect their decision to return to education or their choice of course. The desire to improve the financial situation of their family through education, as discussed above, may increase the number of student parents studying vocational and professional courses, which are perceived to be more likely to lead to stable, paid employment. Advisors and academics that we interviewed noted that students with children were often found in clusters in particular courses such as nursing, teaching and social work.

Around a quarter of FE respondents to our survey were studying for qualifications in health, social work or public services, with around a third of HE students studying in the fields of education or subjects allied to medicine. One advisor suggested that this was because they wanted something concrete in return for the time they had taken out to study. It was also suggested that many of these kinds of courses were better suited for students with children, particularly in terms of the financial support available. Students on PGCE and NHS courses, for example, receive a non-repayable and non means-tested bursary paid monthly. This, as the finance section outlines, is a considerably more attractive deal for those students with caring responsibilities than other student support packages, and more than one parent we spoke to said they would not even consider doing a course that didn't provide a bursary.

Lack of mobility

Student parents' lack of mobility also impacts on their course and institution choice. Recent research has shown that students with children tend to go to university or college near where they live, and will choose from the courses that are available there.³²

The following quote illustrates this choice:

“Although I think the course is good, I believe that there are much better drama degree courses further away. However, when you are a parent, beggars can't be choosers and I am generally satisfied.” HE student parent

Our survey found that 92 per cent of our sample had not moved away to attend university or college, suggesting that most student parents choose courses at institutions local to them. A number of student parents we spoke to were also travelling long distances to attend institutions of their choice, rather than moving the whole family. We also spoke to FE students in focus groups who were considering applying to go to university, and who felt unable to apply for certain courses because of the compulsory time abroad that they involved. One HE student who responded to the survey had stopped studying languages because of this:

“I needed to go (abroad) as part of my study, however, my child tax credit and child benefit were stopped and I was getting a lower student loan. As a result I was paying more for the travel cost (plane ticket), rent, all the material for my son's school, electricity and everything else. I was struggling so much that I needed to borrow money from a friend, and after six months could not cope any longer and came back earlier. I have to change my degree now.”

Student parent, London Metropolitan University

Information

Our research highlighted a chronic lack of information, advice and guidance at every stage of a student parent's experience of further and higher education. In relation to course choice, 51 per cent of survey respondents answered 'no' or 'to some extent' when we asked if they felt they had received all the information

they needed to make an informed choice about their course. This is backed up by other studies; for example, Gingerbread found that lone parents in education or training in East London had struggled to gain basic information regarding course provision. In a study carried out by Brunel University 70 per cent of respondents cited 'information targeted at students with dependent children' as a factor that would help students to complete a degree at the University. 29 per cent of Care to Learn recipients in 2004/05 reported that they would have liked to have received more help or advice whilst on their course.

Modes of study

Financial considerations were often key for students making the decision between part and full-time study. For example, HE students only access childcare funding if they study full-time, and recent changes to benefits legislation means that part-time students can no longer access income support, meaning that the switch to full-time may be beneficial. Another student advisor argued that part-time study can be a safer financial option for lone parents, as their housing benefit isn't affected by student funding.

However, we found that students with children were drawn to part and full-time courses for many different reasons, and individual circumstances made different options more attractive. For example, some students wanted to 'blitz it', by doing the course full-time, so as to minimise the amount of time where they would be struggling financially. Others switched to part-time study because they felt guilty about "neglecting" their children. Circumstances may change, and so having the capability to switch between full and part-time is important – one student parent said that if she hadn't been able to switch she would have had to leave her degree entirely.

The need for flexibility was expressed by both groups of students, as well as interviewees. Being able to move in and out of education more fluidly with flexible degrees would be beneficial for students with caring responsibilities.

Parents as students

Students in many of the focus groups told us that they felt they were better students because of their parenting

responsibilities. The responsibility of providing a secure future for their children motivated many students to continue in their studies despite extremely difficult circumstances:

“Having a child motivates me to study as hard as I can. Before my son was around I didn't put in half as much effort as I do now.”

Student parent, University of Leeds

“Having children whilst studying is the best incentive to do well. I want to do the best I can and provide a secure future for my family.”

Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Time management

Something that came across very strongly when speaking with student parents was how limited their time is. They emphasised the need to be experts at managing their time in order to be able to fulfil their various commitments to work, family and study. Despite their busy lives and numerous commitments, many students whom we spoke to took considerable pride in managing their time well:

“I have four kids, a part-time job, a house to run – and in five and a half years I have never missed a deadline.” Student parent, Norwich City College

Students spoke about their time being “precious” and about “using every spare minute”. Many gave us examples of how they timed their day very precisely. One woman, with three children at three different schools, explained how she factored in the time she spent waiting in the car for her children at each school when planning her study time. Several said that they started working on their assessments as soon as they received them in order to be able to complete them and build in 'contingency time' to allow for unforeseeable circumstances, such as child sickness. It is obvious that being able to plan work in advance is very important to student parents and so early provision of assignment titles can really help them to succeed.

One PhD student we spoke to said he knew a major part of his success was due to the support of his partner who didn't work and therefore had time to provide full-time childcare and run the house. Lone

parents, and those without supportive partners, unsurprisingly felt the pinch of time even more keenly than others:

“A simple set back has a knock-on effect. Being ill for a day means you get behind on uni work, house work and spending time with the kids, and you don’t really have spare time to deal with the backlog. So you end up trying to study in a messy house with grumpy, attention-starved children.” Student parent, University of Leeds

Some lone parents relied on the help of older children to manage the combination of home and study responsibilities:

“As I am on my own I also worry that I am putting too much pressure on my older daughter with her helping out with childcare.” Student parent, University of Leeds

There was also evidence of a real sense of resentment that their experience in this area was not always acknowledged by teaching staff. Some younger students with children felt patronised by older staff in this respect, although it was not exclusively younger student parents who experienced this:

“I find it incredible that they rant on for the first month about time management. I’ve got five kids; I’m good at time management!” Student parent, Kilmarnock College

When and where student parents study

There are a number of factors which affect when and where students with caring responsibilities study. All students with children have to fit their studying around their responsibilities as a parent, meaning that it can be harder for them to access learning resources at their institution, and that they are often more tired than students without such responsibilities.

At night

For 59 per cent of student parents surveyed, one of the main times that they studied was after 10.00pm when

their children had gone to bed. That figure reflects our conversations with student parents in focus groups, many of whom talked about studying when the children were asleep and into the early hours. Others got up early to study before their children woke up:

“I go to sleep with the kids at 9.00pm, wake up at 2.00am and do my work until 6.00am. Then my alarm goes off to do the baby’s bottles and get things ready for the day for the nursery. I get their breakfast and clothes ready, iron them all, then get the kids up about 7.30am and get out of the house by 8.50am.” Student parent, Leicester College

“Having to sit up to 2.00am to get work finished, get up during the night to feed my baby and then get up early to get my baby and myself ready to do it all over again is very hard.” Student parent, South East Regional College

The demands on student parents’ time can mean that they have to study when they are very tired and find it hard to concentrate:

“The downside of being a student and a parent is that, when I come home from university or work in the evening, much of my time is taken up with family stuff. There’s the cooking, discussing the day’s events, assisting with homework, and housework, and I often don’t start studying until around 9.00pm, by which time I am frazzled!” Student parent, University of Leeds

Unsurprisingly, 52 per cent of students with children we surveyed selected ‘tired’ when we asked how they felt as a result combining studying with parenthood.

In the library

Where parents study is, for many, dependent upon the extent to which they are able to access institutional learning resources. Encouragingly, 60 per cent of survey respondents said they felt able to use learning resources in their institutions as much as they needed to, meaning they were free to plan their study time the same as any other student would.

39 per cent did not feel able to access resources when they needed to. Of these, 42 per cent said that this was due in part to not having enough childcare for personal study time. Not being able to take their children into libraries and computer rooms was a problem for 39 per cent, with 26 per cent citing inconvenient opening hours as a problem.³³

Childcare problems limiting access to the library resulted in fines for 16 per cent of all survey respondents, and students in focus groups told us about difficulties accessing short loan texts for the same reason. This problem is exacerbated in the holidays when many students don't have childcare funding, and so have extended periods where they can't access libraries or computer rooms.

Where parents could take children to the library with them, they spoke positively of this facilitating their study, but also the positive effect on their children:

“I think my girls benefit when they come into the library with me. It lets them see how the college runs – they are very much in awe of it at the moment. It's positive. There are toys in the library and they give them books and crayons.” Student parent, Norwich City College

In class

Most of the students we spoke to in focus groups found it difficult to work at home with the distractions of home life. For example, a young single mother in a focus group described how hard it was to work with two young children around and no partner to provide childcare. For this reason, students with children really valued class time and found it difficult when other students were disruptive:

“This is my primary learning place. I don't have time to go home and reinforce it.”

Student parent, Kilmarnock College

Sometimes this could turn to feelings of frustration and resentment. For example, several parents in one group said they felt the other students didn't realise how little time they had to complete assignments, or how important successful completion of the course was to them.

At home

For those students who needed to use a computer for their studies, 85 per cent of students in our survey used their own at home. The majority of those (71 per cent) did so either because of a lack of childcare or because their children were not allowed in computer rooms at their institution. This latter factor is particularly important for students whose children are perceived to be too old for formal childcare, but who parents do not feel willing to leave at home for long stretches of time on their own:

“It would help my studies if they had somewhere to hang around at uni whilst I used the library for a couple of hours every so often. They are too old for a crèche and a bit too young (although my 12-year-old might argue!) to hang around the bar.”

Student parent, University of Leeds

“Although my children are older and don't need childcare, I still have to do my duties as a mother, which means being there for them whenever I can. So, it's more convenient to do the bulk of my studies at home.” Student parent, London Metropolitan University

Another reason given for working almost exclusively at home was living considerable distances from their institution, meaning that there is a time and cost implication in accessing institutional resources. This came out particularly strongly among survey respondents:

“I live over a hundred miles away from uni, and my children are in childcare 100 miles away from uni!” Student parent, Plymouth

University

“It takes too long to travel to university and car parking and fuel costs are too high.”

Student parent, Northumbria University

The cost of equipment was also a factor in students' decisions about where to study, for example, for students on courses that utilise expensive equipment, such as music technology software. Several other students suggested that it would be helpful if parents could receive help with internet costs, since most courses require internet access, and they are less able

than other groups to access institutional learning resources because of childcare availability.

Missing class

There are certain circumstances under which it is more or less impossible for students with children not to miss class and around half of the students we surveyed (49 per cent) had done so because of problems with childcare.

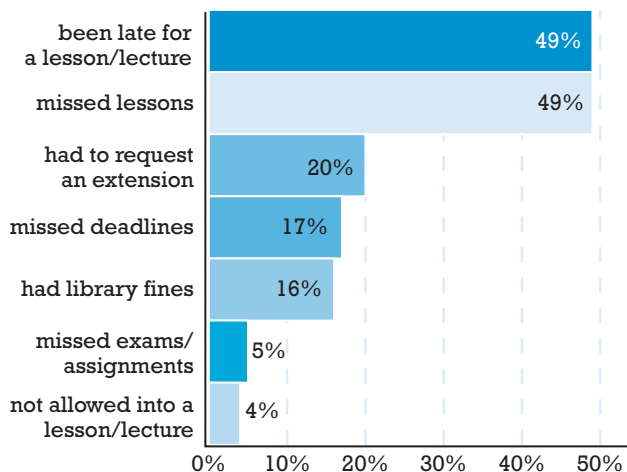
Students in focus groups spoke to us about the difficulties of catching up when they had to take time out of college or university, when they had very little spare time as it was. In this context, it is clear that online resources and catch-up materials become very important for students with children. However, we found a wide variety of institutional and individual responses to students missing class. Tactics aimed at deterring students as a whole from skipping classes inadvertently put those who have no choice other than to do so at a disadvantage. For example, we were told of a lecturer who would put his lecture notes up online after the lecture with key information missing from the slides to punish non-attendees.

More positive practice we were told about in focus groups includes a student who said that his tutor took the time to email him the work that he missed when his child was ill. And yet another tutor we heard about made sure that all the information from his class was online to mitigate any problems caused by unavoidable absences. Our survey reflected the unpredictability of tutors' responses to these issues, with 48 per cent of students saying that the level of understanding shown by staff depended on the individual.

Attendance targets

Related to missing class, students in a number of different focus groups also raised the issue of attendance targets. The connection between targets and funding – especially for FE students – means that events such as child sickness can become incredibly stressful for students with children, especially if support and teaching staff are not sympathetic to their circumstances. It was pointed out that the majority of childcare providers won't take children who are ill, and so parents often have no choice but to stay at home with their children. The general complaint in relation to attendance targets was that they were used as a stick

Survey question: Have any of the following things happened because of problems with your childcare?



to beat students with, rather than to flag up any issues which were making it difficult for them to attend class. For example, we spoke to several students with children whose funding had been stopped without any discussion with either teaching or administrative staff.

“I had to fight to get my last grant because of my children being sick and the nursery wouldn't let them go in. I got it because my tutor got involved, but it's wrong really.”

Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

An FE advisor we interviewed stressed the importance of granting such students authorised absences to ensure that a lower attendance would not automatically trigger their funding being cut without an interview or discussion first.

Pregnancy

Another reason that student parents may have to take time out of college or university is that they become pregnant during the course of study. In this case, students can be supported to continue with their studies without having to defer, although the expectation appears to be that the student will do so. Positive practices we heard about include one woman who became pregnant whose lectures were all placed online so she could access them in the weeks after her baby had been born when she was unable to attend college. She also said

her lecturers authorised absences during that time so her attendance targets were not affected.

Unfortunately, we heard other examples of less supportive responses to students becoming pregnant, including one college where pregnant students are regularly refused entry to courses because of an assumption that they will not stay the course. We also spoke to a woman who had failed an exam because her waters broke, and another who was refused a comfortable chair to sit in during her exam when she was full-term. Others were forced off courses, or left with no support or information as to how they could be supported to continue their course, instead battling against an expectation that they should drop out or defer.

Course organisation

The previous section explains the impact of caring responsibilities on the way in which parents study. In this section we discuss how course organisation and other institutional practices can inhibit parents from being able to get the most out of their education, and identify where there are innovative approaches being employed to address student parents' needs.

Provision of timetabling information

The majority of interviewees and focus group participants we spoke to commented on the problems that students with children face in relation to timetabling. One of the key issues is the (lack of) notice that student parents are given of their timetable for the year.

More than a third of all survey respondents received their timetable on the first day of term or after the start of term, and just under half (43 per cent) felt that their timetable was not provided early enough for them to make adequate childcare arrangements. Of those, 11 per cent lost their childcare place or childminder as a result of late timetable provision, and 14 per cent had to pay a retainer to their childcare provider. The vast majority (87 per cent) said that the delay had caused them stress and anxiety.

Students in focus groups described the impact of late provision of timetables during the first few weeks of term. For example, several had to leave classes early, or arrive late, while they waited for their childcare arrangements to catch up with their timetable. A survey respondent described how it had limited her course choices:

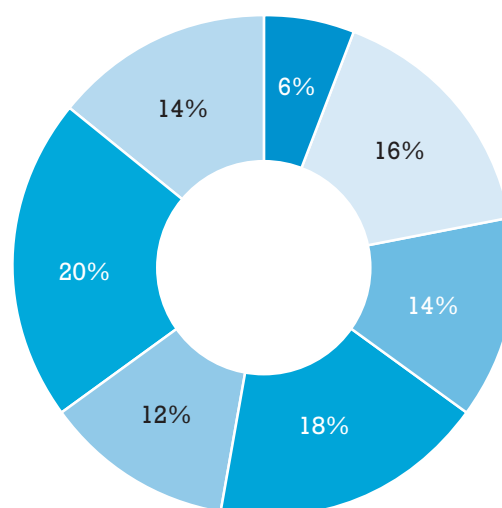
“Having the timetable in the summer holiday would be useful as childcare could be planned a lot better, rather than having to choose modules very quickly that work around family members.” Student parent, Cornwall College

Around seven per cent of survey respondents said that early provision of timetables would make the most significant improvement to their experience as a student parent. Allowing students with caring responsibilities the flexibility to change their seminar times (where there are options) also helps where timetables cannot be provided earlier.³⁴

Changes to timetables

Students with children, particularly those who use registered childcare providers, tend not to have childcare arrangements which they can change at the last minute. Nurseries and childminders, for example, can require a month's notice for any changes to schedules. Subsequently, last-minute changes to class times creates stress for student parents, as they attempt to rearrange

Survey question: When did you receive your timetable this year?



- More than a month before the start of term 16%
- 3–4 weeks before the start of term 14%
- 1–2 weeks before the start of term 18%
- Less than a week before the start of term 12%
- On the first day of term 20%
- After the start of term 14%
- Skipped question 6%

their childcare, because of which they may lose money or miss a lecture. Several students raised last-minute changes and lack of notice as a key problem for them. This problem was intensified for those people with several children in different types of childcare (e.g. after-school club and nursery). Students suggested that colleges and universities should have to give at least two weeks notice when the timetable changes.

Timing of the day

“I have to get my son to school for 9.00am. How can I be in college and at school at the same time? You can’t be in two places at once!” Student parent, Kilmarnock College

Students with children can find it difficult to arrive in time for 9.00am lectures because they coincide with the start of the school or nursery day, and can also find late or evening lectures or classes difficult to attend for similar reasons. Around half of all the student parents we surveyed had been late for a lecture because of childcare problems.

Institutional and individual teaching staff’s responses to this fact had a big impact on student parents. We heard of several examples where teaching staff had been unsympathetic and inflexible with regard to this, but also where teaching staff had gone out of their way to support students with children. For example, one Access lecturer would ensure that no vital information was given in the first 15 minutes of classes that began at 9.00am because he knew there were student parents in the class who found it difficult to arrive on time. At the other end of the scale, meanwhile, four per cent of survey respondents had been locked out of a lecture or class because they were late due to childcare problems, and a student in a focus group who had to leave class 10 minutes early to pick up her children from school said she was marked down absent every time she did so. As well as being stressful for students with children, the timing of the college or university day can have a significant financial impact. When we asked what would most improve her experience as a student parent, one student said:

“Parent-friendly course hours. 9.15am starts would have saved me £240 a month minimum.” Student parent, University of the West of Scotland

School holidays, half-terms and inset days are similarly awkward for students with children, as they rarely match up with college or university holidays and reading weeks, and sometimes don’t match up between schools. Students often have no choice but to stay at home and look after their children during these times, or bring their children with them to class if their tutors allow it.

The students we met who were most positive about their experiences of education were those where the timetables were designed to fit in with their responsibilities as parents. These included Access students and those studying in institutions where there were specific provisions for mature and parent students. One course we heard about, which had high numbers of student parents, was split into two streams, one for students with children and one without. The first group was prioritised to have lectures during the middle of the day and the second had more lectures in the early and late slots. ESOL courses at Hackney Community College were also structured to allow students with children to pick up and drop off their children at school. In a centre designed for adult learners at the University of Leeds, the reading week was always at the same time as half-term, so that student parents could look after their children in that week and wouldn’t have the problems that most students face in finding temporary childcare. This was followed by a ‘catch-up’ week which acknowledged the fact that students with children would be providing childcare during the first week and therefore would have less time to study.

Holidays

A perfect example of the way in which the academic calendar is organised with the traditional student in mind is the timing of assessments and deadlines in relation to holidays, during which time it is assumed that students will have more time than usual to study. As the student parents we spoke to pointed out on numerous occasions, however, holidays are not generally a restful time for them but a time when they often have to do more work looking after their children who are home from school.³⁵ Christmas in particular was described by various people as “crunch time”, “the worst time of the year” and “the most stressful time”, with a combination of organising a family Christmas, looking after children fulltime and deadlines for assessment or exams in January looming:

“I find it difficult when I hear people say ‘Oh great, it’s Christmas or Easter’ because that’s written off time for me – you almost feel like you have lost two weeks. You have to plan it very well and you study when the children have gone to bed; I find holidays more difficult than term time.” Student parent, Norwich City College

The Brunel study suggested that at specific points in the year, during holidays with deadlines afterwards, student parents were at a high risk of dropping out.³⁶

Deadlines

Another common problem experienced by students with children is meeting deadlines when unexpected problems come up. One in five of all survey respondents had had to request an extension because the problems associated with their childcare provision. One advisor we spoke to said that they would always recommend that students with children submitted mitigating circumstance requests for assessments if they had experienced such problems. However, focus group participants who had attempted to negotiate deadlines because of child sickness or other childcare issues did not always find tutors receptive to their requests, and some felt that they were routinely disbelieved. One student described the procedures her department used as “impersonal and unforgiving”. Another survey respondent said:

“My tutor decided that I had to hand in an assignment at 9.00am. My college is an hour and a half away from home and my kid’s breakfast club doesn’t open until 8.00am. He said that if he could get in by 9.00am then everyone could.” Student parent, University of Lincoln

Others experienced support and understanding:

“I’d just had my daughter and had misjudged my timings feeding and sleeping and was a day late handing in my assignment. The wonderful lady wrote down the day before so I wasn’t deducted anything. I cried with relief and at her being so lovely and understanding!” Student parent

Once again, we found that those students on courses designed for mature learners often had more positive experiences with regard to negotiating deadlines with teaching staff. The flipside of this is when teaching staff seemed to be impervious to the particular circumstances of students with caring responsibilities. We heard of one student who was refused an extension for an essay even though the reason was that she had to travel a long distance to take her grandson, who had cancer, to hospital.

Group work

The study into the experiences of student parents at Brunel University highlighted the difficulties of group work for students with caring responsibilities. Group work can be difficult because there is often very little notice given, and it may take place at a time or location that is difficult for a student parent to access because of childcare responsibilities. As noted previously in this section, it is very difficult for many students with children to do anything outside of a meticulously structured timetable. Several students in one FE College raised this issue, one of whom said that, for these reasons, “half of the time (group work) is an impossibility”.

Retention

Of the students we surveyed, 60 per cent said they had thought about giving up their course; this figure rises to 65 per cent for lone parents. When we asked what had stopped student parents from giving up, the top three reasons given were personal ambition, encouragement from friends and family, and wanting to create financial security for their children in the future. For lone parents, encouragement from friends and family was a less important motivator than creating financial security for their children in the future. These factors highlight the aspirations of parents in education, but it is clear that structural barriers, such as those outlined in the previous section, can pose a threat to their success.

There was general acknowledgement from student advisors, academics and other interviewees that it was incredibly hard work being a student with children, and uncertainty of funding and poor timetabling often meant that students felt unable to carry on. Students in our focus groups told us of many examples of student parents they knew who had dropped out because of money worries, family pressure to leave, guilt about

neglecting the family and home, children not settling in childcare or a lack of childcare. Sometimes the financial strain is simply just too much to bear:

“Financially I found it very difficult and stressful relying on my 16 hours work and tax credits, but I felt it would be worth it in the end as it was only for two years and I was almost certain I could hack it. But it was very stressful, and if the course had been any longer, I am positive I couldn’t have kept it up.” Student parent, South East Regional College

Support from staff

Our research found support from teaching and non-teaching staff to be critical for student parents’ success, both in terms of their achievement and ultimately their retention. Previous research has shown that support from tutors is particularly valuable to those who have been out of education for an extended period³⁷ – like a significant proportion of our survey respondents:³⁸ But we found the level of support and understanding shown by tutors and other staff to vary hugely between institutions, and sometimes between courses and departments within those institutions. Without the underlying processes and protections that working parents enjoy, students with children are – as one interviewee put it – “at the mercy of beneficent tutors”.

Where support was good, students were keen to tell us: 39 per cent of respondents felt that staff were understanding and supportive of their circumstances when necessary.

“They [tutors] understand we’re not just students, we’re parents too.” Student parent, Norwich City College

“My tutor is very supportive if there is too much stuff going on at home and it is going to have an effect on my work. I did an online exam two weeks ago and because I passed it my tutor said ‘see what you can do!’ She motivates me, she actually pushes me to achieve.” Student parent, Hackney Community College

In our focus groups, we heard about many individuals who had gone out of their way to improve the experiences of student parents, and we were struck with how often we would hear the same name being repeated by lots of students in one institution. Usually this was a tutor, but on other occasions an advice worker, student officer or funding administrator. One focus group participant directly linked such an individual to student parent retention in her own institution:

“Without people like her (the students’ union president) we wouldn’t have any student (parents) because we’d walk straight back out the door!”

Another student we spoke to felt that her tutors positively valued her experience as a mature student with children:

“I believe that life experience is really valued by our tutors. We are able to contribute a great deal to our own learning.” Student parent, University of Leeds

Other student parents experienced a surprising level of hostility and indifference towards their circumstances. Students in focus groups and responding to the survey described tutors being “unsympathetic to problems around home life”, “unapproachable”, “not understanding parental responsibilities”, and “unable or unwilling to relate to my situation”.³⁹

“When I was pregnant I did not tell any of my tutors as I felt I could not talk to them. When I finally needed to talk to someone nobody would help me and my personal tutor dismissed me as his tutee and told me to find someone to ask.” Student parent, 20, Keele University

Our survey highlighted that support from tutors could be significant; 12 per cent of all survey respondents said that encouragement and support from staff was one of the things that had made them stay when they thought about giving up.⁴⁰

Recommendations

“My tutors were brilliant and were very flexible with work deadlines – especially for mothers.” Student parent, South East Regional College

Some institutions are making real progress in changing their methods to support ‘non-traditional’ students. All too often however, teaching and learning in our institutions is still modelled around the needs of young, school-leaver, single students, which can hinder the progress and participation of groups including student parents. The following recommendations identify changes that could facilitate these students’ involvement in further and higher education, and enhance their learning experience.

Modes of study

- Where possible, all courses should have the option of being undertaken on a full or part-time basis, allowing flexibility depending on change of circumstances; government and institutions should consider the adoption of a national credit framework that would recognise the need of some student parents to ‘dip in and out’ of education.
- Institutions should implement a ‘pregnancy policy’ to minimise the impact on a student’s education should she become pregnant during her course of study.

New technologies

Where possible, tutors and administrators should incorporate new forms of technology that enable students to participate even if they are unable to physically attend class, including:

- podcasting of lectures or web-cam access to lectures that take place outside of school hours;
- online discussion forums to allow students to engage in discussion with peers;
- uploading notes and presentations from classes so they can be accessed via the Internet.

Staff support

Because student parents may be unable to see tutors during office hours, teaching staff should consider:

- making efforts to be available to meet with student parents, even if this is outside of normal office hours;
- having ‘virtual’ office hours, where they are available online.

Timetables

- Timetables, at least provisional ones, should be available one month before the start of term, allowing parents to make adequate childcare arrangements.
- Where possible, institutions should aim to ‘bunch’ contact hours into the middle of the day to tally with the school day, particularly when there are high numbers of mature students on courses.
- Where this is not possible, student parents should not be penalised if they are unable to make 9.00am starts, or have to leave twilight classes early.

Deadlines

- Departments and tutors should avoid last-minutes changes to timetables.
- Institutions should reimburse students for any financial losses they incur with childcare providers as a result of such changes.
- Deadlines should not be based on presumptions of when students will have free time – for example after holidays, reading weeks and weekends. When deadlines do fall at these times, there should be flexibility to allow those with caring responsibilities to negotiate an alternative deadline with no sanctions for doing so.
- There should be a special dispensation for student parents to hand in work by email if they are unable to get to university or college due to lack of childcare.

Attendance

- Where attendance targets are used, a drop below the target line should result in an intervention to support the student and not be used to stop funding without warning; authorised absence policies should reflect the specific needs of parents.
- Student parents should not be penalised for the fact that they will have to occasionally miss a class as a result of their caring responsibilities.

Child-friendly campus

- Libraries should have child-friendly areas so parents can access resources.
- Student parents should be exempt from short-term loans and able to appeal fines accrued because of childcare problems.
- Students who are unable to use learning resources due to a lack of childcare should be eligible for financial support from institutions to help with internet and computer costs.



3. Student life



Summary

“My life doesn’t revolve around college.”

Student parent, South East Regional College

“I have got a little group... they are all younger than me but I love them. They’d been trying to get me to go out so I went out with them and I had a great time! I felt like I was alive again!” Student Parent, London

South Bank University

When student parents walk out of the lab, lecture hall or classroom, they enter a world which can contrast sharply with that of their course mates. Evenings might be spent cooking dinner, helping with homework and telling bedtime stories, before settling down to study until the early hours. Mornings are taken up with getting children ready and off to school or nursery before going to university or college. Rather than being a break, holidays are times when student parents’ workload is increased as children stay home from school and essay deadlines loom. Busy, established lives, and differing priorities, mean that students with children are often not as involved in college or university life outside of the classroom as other students.

- 77 per cent of those we surveyed said they did not think it was easy to get involved with university or college life as a student parent.
- When we asked students with children what would help them to become more involved in student life, the most popular answer was ‘child-friendly attitudes’ (68 per cent of responses).

But we found other reasons that students with children weren’t getting involved in extracurricular activities. Students cited a lack of time, childcare and information as barriers that prevented them being able to get involved. There were also some concerns that students’ unions or extracurricular activities were focussed (either explicitly or implicitly) around alcohol. Furthermore, the costs associated with activities, as well as the extra childcare costs made much involvement impossible.

Despite all of this, some parents were making the most of ‘student life’. They spoke positively about being “someone else other than mum”, about developing supportive relationships with course mates and other student parents, and in some cases taking representative roles within students’ unions.

continues overleaf...

Summary (continued)

- 11 per cent of respondents had been involved in a club or society; 17 per cent had been a course representative.
- One in five respondents had voted in a students' union election.
- When we asked survey respondents whether they would like to be supported to meet up with other student parents, over half said yes; this rises to 64 per cent for lone parents and 71 per cent for international students.

Research findings

Different priorities, busy lives

This section outlines our findings in relation to student parents' experiences of student life outside of the classroom. The lifestyles of student parents can prevent those who want to from making the most of the wider student experience; the limits on their spare time can make involvement in extracurricular activities all but impossible. However structural and attitudinal barriers can also prevent those who are able and willing to get involved from doing so; 77 per cent of those we surveyed said they did not think it was easy to get involved with university or college life as a student parent.

Something has to give

Student parents have multiple constraints on their time, including paid work, caring for children and other relatives and studying. These priorities compete for time and focus group participants often spoke about the need for "something to give". For some, this was housework, and for others it was sleep.

"I have learnt to survive on very little sleep and not to notice the cobwebs." Student parent, South East Regional College

This can have a knock-on effect on their willingness to participate in student activities. For example, one student said that as a consequence of the lack of sleep she felt like she had "less energy" than when she had been a student without children. Others spoke about being "always on the go until the children go to bed", or feeling like they were "constantly running" until the late evening. Over half of all survey respondents selected 'tired' when asked how they felt as a result of combining parenthood and study. Most frequently, though, what 'gave' was their personal leisure time.

"I've not really had a chance to have a life lately... I have had to make a sacrifice."

Student parent, Leicester College

A student parent from London, who was completing the degree she had started before being a parent, said that the lack of social life was the biggest difference between being a student before having children and afterwards. More than a third (37 per cent) of respondents said that they felt they simply did not have time to socialise at all. For some students, who had envisaged being part of a student community, this was a real disappointment.

Established lives

As has been noted, the majority of students with children do not move to attend university or college. Their lives can be considered to be more settled than many students', with family, friends and support networks already in place – 52 per cent of survey respondents said they socialised with people outside of college or university most of the time.⁴¹ Unlike those who move to attend college or university, many students with children don't consider meeting new people, building new social lives, or extracurricular activities to be priorities:

"I'm involved enough with my spouse and other friends and activities." Student parent, University of Strathclyde

Only three per cent of survey respondents said that one of their main motivations in entering education was 'to mix with different people' and only two per cent said 'to have a good social life'. Students also spoke about prioritising their children's social lives above their own:

"My children want to do other things and as their parent I feel that I should be supporting them in their extra-curricular activities. This naturally limits my time for other things."

Student parent, University of Plymouth

Children are the priority

Some students (58 per cent) said they felt guilty for not spending enough time with their children as a result of their time spent studying. For this reason, many parents wanted to ensure that any spare time they had they spent with their children:

“To be honest I feel so guilty leaving the children that I never spend any longer out of the home than I have to – socialising is a luxury I can ill afford.” Student parent, University of Ulster

“As a parent your priorities are different. It is more important to be at home for your children to create some stability and to help them achieve rather than going out with others.” Student parent, University of Birmingham

Caring responsibilities

We met numerous student parents in focus groups who were caring for people other than their young children, such as adult disabled children, disabled partners and elderly parents. Their caring responsibilities were wide and varied, backing up Hilary Land’s assertion that “care is woven in and out of their [student parents’] lives”.⁴² Student advisors agreed, with one commenting that the student parents they saw were often “students in their forties, with teenage children and elderly parents to care for”.⁴³

Additional caring responsibilities present another key pressure on student parents’ time which can mean that they are not able to get involved in student activities. This means that caring is not something that only affects their life for a finite amount of time, and the constraints on their time won’t necessarily be solved by more childcare.

Child-unfriendly campuses

When we asked students with children what would help them to become more involved in student life, the most popular answer was ‘child-friendly attitudes’ (68 per cent). This was more important to student parents we surveyed than the cost or availability of childcare. Many parents expressed the view that they would be able to get more involved in activities if their children were able to come with them and this came across particularly strongly in survey responses.

Several parents we spoke to were unsure as to

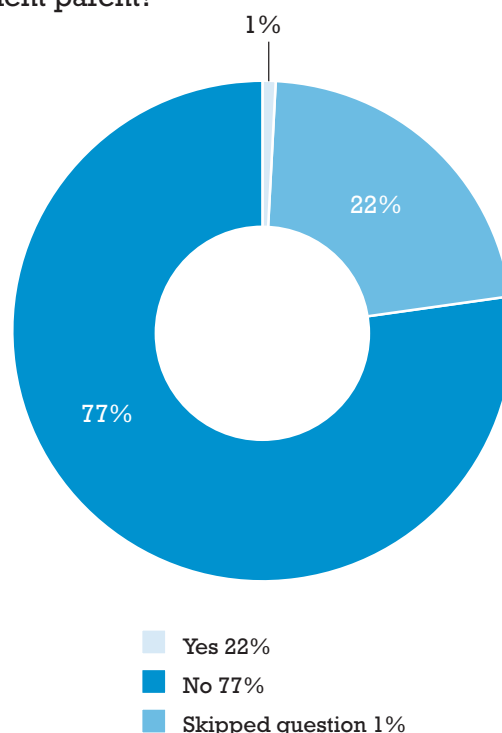
whether children were allowed in their college or university social spaces, and others were unwilling to take their children into those environments because it was felt they were too adult. Previous research has found that student parents at one London HEI were alienated by the ‘machoness’ of the students’ union.⁴⁴ There was a feeling that too often the union seemed to focus around alcohol consumption, and nearly a fifth of survey respondents said that non-alcoholic spaces would help them to become more involved.

Student parents were not necessarily suggesting there should be no evening or alcohol-based activities; in fact several said they would like to attend such events on occasion. But many felt that there was a scarcity of events that offered an alternative and suggested that child-friendly events would really help them to get involved. Furthermore, they noted that it was important that these events were suitable for children of different ages:

“It’s important not to always assume that parents have young children, but to remember school-age children also need looking after.”

Student parent, University of the West of England
Some students also thought that being able to bring

Survey question: Do you feel it is easy to get involved in university or college life as a student parent?



their children along to events would really help their children to feel more positive about their parent's involvement in education. One thought that it might make her children "feel good about the University". A more child-friendly approach can really have an impact, as the following quote illustrates:

"I'm taking my children to the students' union Christmas party for the first time this year – I've never been offered the opportunity before. I may become more involved when it is possible for my children to be involved as well." Student parent, Liverpool Hope University

Time and childcare

Whilst a lack of time presented some students with an insurmountable obstacle to participation in student activities, for others it was only really a problem because of a lack of access to childcare. For 26 per cent of survey respondents, a baby-sitting network would help them to get more involved in student life, with 39 per cent selecting childcare expenses as an incentive. As one interviewee noted, a lack of time and childcare were "inextricably linked":⁴⁵

"I would like to be involved, but I would need a nanny and a PA!" Student parent, Staffordshire University

Many students spoke about having to rush off straight away after classes because they only had funding to cover childcare class time, meaning they weren't able to participate in activities or spend time with course mates. Not being part of networks with peers made it harder for students to find out about any social events that were happening:

"I don't have time to hang around, and if it's not on a poster near an entrance or an exit then I won't know about it." Student parent, Southampton Solent University

Where courses were designed for mature students with additional responsibilities, the experience was often that no one in the group had time to attend or organise social activities.

Information

Student parents in our survey and focus groups also spoke about simply not knowing what was available in terms of student activities. Some expressed frustration that notification of events sometimes didn't allow parents to organise childcare in time to attend:

"The union emailed about this event on the day – I need at least two weeks to organise a babysitter." Student parent, London South Bank University

Students with children may not hear about events and activities through the same channels as other students and can benefit from specific targeting. For example, we spoke to a student who had heard about the students' union when representatives from the union came to her class to talk to students about it. She subsequently became a student officer at the same union – but would never have heard about the opportunity unless officers had taken the time to go into classes.

A quarter of survey respondents had accessed support and advice through student advice and welfare centres and one student advisor observed that student advice services may be the only contact a student parent has with any services outside of the classroom. For this reason it is vital that such services are able to signpost parents to activities and events that might interest them.

Too old or too young

Sadly, many of the student parents we spoke to hadn't got involved with extra curricular or union events as they simply felt that they didn't 'fit in'. Some felt that students with children weren't seen as the kind of students who would be interested in extracurricular activities:

"You see all these people handing out flyers, and you walk past them with your buggy and they don't hand you one, as if to say 'you couldn't possibly attend.'" Student parent, University of Leeds

Many other student parents identified this attitude as age-related. They spoke about feeling 'too old' for the students' union and felt that events were targeted specifically at young students because they were more

likely to attend because they have more spare time. However, it wasn't only older students who felt that they didn't fit in. Other students identified the tension between being both a parent and a young student in terms of engaging with extracurricular activities:

“I feel too young for mature students' events, but too responsible for the others.”

Student parent, University of Leeds

A student at the University of Hertfordshire also raised the issue of the perceived attitudes of her peers who didn't have children, saying that at 24 years old she felt “embarrassed to be a parent”.

Clubs and societies

Previous research suggests that there are low participation rates among student parents in clubs and societies.⁴⁶ Of our survey respondents, 11 per cent had been members of clubs or societies. Of those who hadn't, more than half gave the reason as not having enough time. Others (14 per cent) didn't think they would “fit in”, felt the union “wasn't for them”, or “felt too old or too young”. Some (11 per cent) had no interest in doing so and 9 per cent didn't participate because they didn't have childcare.

Among those we spoke to in focus groups, some had been put off joining because they felt they couldn't meet the level of commitment required by clubs and societies, either in terms of money or time, or both. Some said they couldn't afford to attend weekly meetings because of the cost of childcare involved. For others, having to find money for joining or weekly fees could be difficult when they had so many other pressures on their finances.

Student parents getting involved

Despite the difficulties described in the first part of this chapter, we came across many examples of student parents who were involved in student life, as members of clubs and societies, course representatives, or simply through friendships with course mates. For these students, participation in further or higher education wasn't simply about gaining qualifications:

“It's nice to be someone else other than Mum!” Student parent, Ystrad Mynach College

Friendships and networks with course mates and other student parents were key to student parents' sense of ‘belonging’.⁴⁷

Course mates

Student parents' experiences of friendship with course mates varied according to a number of different factors, but on the whole, where there were a number of students with children on a course, their experience seemed to be better. This can have an impact on students' learning; for example, one advisor commented that some student parents on courses with few or no other parents didn't even feel they knew their course mates well enough to ask them for notes to catch up on lectures they had missed. Some (10 per cent) said they felt isolated; however a considerable proportion of those we spoke to in focus groups described positive relationships with other students.

The students who had been invited out socially by their course mates really valued the invitation. As discussed at the beginning of this section, many student parents already have pre-existing friendship groups, but some recognised that this didn't exclude other friendships. One student parent said:

“I mainly socialise with friends outside [of university], but it's nice to feel welcome [at social events with course mates].”

Others did not socialise with their course mates in person because of issues to do with childcare or money, but were in contact via social networking sites, such as Facebook, and by email.

Networks with student parents

When we asked survey respondents whether they would like to be supported to meet up with other student parents, more than half said yes; this rises to 64 per cent for lone parents and 71 per cent for international students. Those we spoke to who were already involved in networks of parents said how helpful it was to talk to people “who knew what (they) were talking about”, and described how much easier it was to cope knowing “that you're not alone”.

Students identified a number of different potential functions of such groups. These included practical elements, such as establishing babysitting networks

and picking up each other's children from school, to socialising and having someone to talk to. They also suggested that the group could allow them to share information, and it should be noted that students in all of our focus groups used the occasion to share information about finances and educational facilities, among other things. The following are typical of comments participants made after the group ended:

“It would be really nice if there was a group like this, like today, it's been good ... you all know exactly what I'm talking about.”

Student parent, London South Bank University

“It's been interesting – and I don't feel quite so alone now.”

Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

There were concerns that parents wouldn't have the time to meet in person so they suggested that internet forums could be used, with occasional meetings. Students were explicit about needing support to set such things up because of their lack of spare time.

Representation

Equality Challenge Unit carried out a piece of research into diversity in HE students' unions in 2007. Significantly, students with dependents were identified throughout the report as a group who were likely to encounter difficulties accessing services, participating in democratic and representative structures, and involvement in student activities. Some (27 per cent) of the union staff responding to the survey disagreed that election processes were open and accessible to students who are parents and carers, and 71 per cent disagreed that student parents and carers were proportionately represented amongst elected officers. Staff cited canvassing and excessive demands of a sabbatical position as reasons for this, in addition to issues with childcare.⁴⁸

As well as the practical difficulties faced by students with children in participating in democratic and representative structures, it is clear that some student parents feel disengaged from such activities. A Leeds University Union study identified that students who feel the union 'is not for them' are unlikely to get involved, and that if they are not able to feed into the democratic process and highlight what needs to

change, then nothing changes and they continue to feel excluded.⁴⁹ This feeling was echoed by one student advisor who commented that all too often student parents can be isolated from the representational elements of the union, as they see the union as somewhere for 'traditional' students, headed by sabbatical teams who represent that cohort.⁵⁰ A focus group participant also commented that it felt to her that "nobody (in the union) really has responsibility for student parents".

But student parents would appear not to be as disengaged as this commentary would suggest. Remarkably, considering the limitations on their time already outlined, in focus groups we spoke to student parents in a range of representational roles. These included a former vice-president, members of various union councils, a chair of a union council, a black students' officer and several course reps. Significantly, the Black Students' Officer did highlight that she found it possible to be an officer because she was able to bring her children along to meetings when necessary.

In our survey, 17 per cent of all respondents had been a class or course rep and we met several students in our focus groups who were involved in this way. This compares with a total of only 77 people who have stood for a position in a students' union election (a further 96 respondents said they intended to in the future). Being a course rep can be a way for students with caring responsibilities to get involved in representation without having to commit huge amounts of time or energy. For some, being a course rep can be the gateway for engagement in other activities:

“I was class rep, and someone said ‘do you think you could be Chair of student council?’ So I thought, ‘I could do that!’” Student parent, Norwich City College

Around 20 per cent of survey respondents had voted in a students' union election; this is higher than the student body in general and probably reflects a bias in the survey sample. But whilst current structures and working practices in many students' unions make it very difficult for students with children to get involved, our survey shows that significant numbers of student parents would like to be or are already involved in representation.

Recommendations

“It would be lovely to be able to talk to people experiencing the same things as you.”

Student parent, University of Leeds

Students’ unions should endeavour to become ‘child-friendly’, both in terms of both their building and their practices. It is vital that student parents feel able to become involved in their union and that their families feel welcome on campus and within the union itself. To achieve this, students’ unions should consider the following:

Facilitating student parents’ involvement

- Making funds available to help students with childcare requirements to be able to take part in student activities, recognising the positive effect that involvement in extracurricular student life can have, as well as how engagement in student activities can overcome the isolation that those with caring responsibilities can feel.
- Directing promotion of roles such as course representatives to student parents, as our research suggests that students with children are most likely to become course representatives.
- Ensuring that relevant information is provided to all staff, officers and volunteers who could have contact with student parents, including student advisors and presidents of clubs and societies.

Child-friendly spaces

“I don’t have a life outside the classroom.”

Student parent, Kilmarnock College

- Ensuring that there are areas on campus and in the students’ union where students and their children are welcome.
- Making baby-changing facilities available for all parents to use; these facilities should be available to both male and female parents.
- Allocating specific areas where students can breastfeed.
- Producing accessible route maps for those with prams and buggies.

Child-friendly events

- Developing a programme of activities that students can bring their children to, such as sporting events, day trips, picnics and film screenings. There should be a range of activities appropriate for children of different ages.
- Developing a specific series of family-oriented ‘welcome’ events during the opening weeks of term. These should begin when international students enrol and continue through the opening weeks of term.
- Running events for families out of term-time, given that many student parents will live permanently in the area.

Peer-to-peer support

“I am the only student parent in my class, and as a result I feel incredibly isolated and lonely.” Student parent, Glasgow Metropolitan College

- Supporting the development of online or in-person networks of student parents, recognising the lack of time they have to establish these on their own.
- Establishing mentoring networks for student parents within the institution and in collaboration with other institutions.

Making democratic processes accessible

- Evaluating the ways in which student parents’ needs can be represented through their democratic systems, given the constraints on their time.
- Making some financial support available to help with childcare for candidates and elected officers who have children.
- Examine the profiles of sabbatical officers and job descriptions of staff members to identify roles that include student parents within their remit.
- Consulting with student parents, as well as other groups within their membership, about decisions that will impact on their experience.
- Reviewing working practices of sabbatical officers to ensure that they are flexible enough to accommodate students’ caring responsibilities.

4. Money matters





Summary

“I am due to go bankrupt because of my money situation. I am trying to provide a better life for me, but also so that my wee girl is proud of me for having an education and for trying to better my life and her life. But the money situation that I went through this year is unbearable.” Student parent, Kilmarnock College

Concerns relating to student finance and benefits entitlements for students with children in both sectors were reported by the majority of participants in this research. Problems identified fell into four broad areas:

Inequality of funding across sectors, ages and modes of study

- Students receive significantly different amounts of funding for childcare and associated course costs depending on mode of study, sector, age and the UK country in which they study (see Appendix A).
- Adult learners in FE are particularly disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts under the age of 20, as are Welsh FE learners under 20, part-time HE students in England who receive no funding at all for childcare, and Northern Irish nursing students who receive a smaller bursary than other nursing students in the UK and cannot access discretionary funds; postgraduates who (aside from PGCE students) do not receive any statutory support for childcare; and the majority of Scottish students who have no entitlement to childcare funding at all (those who do receive a tiny proportion compared to their counterparts in the rest of the UK).

The insufficiency of funding available

- Students with children face considerable financial pressures due to a combination of insufficient childcare funding, lack of funding for associated course costs, and reduced benefits. This has a negative impact on their families and studies.
- When asked what one thing would most improve their experience as a student parent, half of the survey responses related to funding.
- Many felt that they had been better off on benefits than as a student parent, and were being disadvantaged for wanting to improve their position in life.

continues overleaf...

Summary (continued)

- Others felt considerable guilt about the hardship they were exposing their family to as a result of becoming a student.
- Around three quarters (77 per cent) of those who work said they do so to cover their basic living costs. Exactly half (50 per cent) do so to avoid getting into debt.
- Over half of our survey respondents (54 per cent) had taken on debts, other than student loans, because their living costs exceeded their income; this rises to 61 per cent for lone parents.

“Commuting costs me £130 per month, which is money my family don’t see.” Student parent, University of Manchester

The complexity of, and interaction between, student support and benefits

- Student parents need to be ‘experts’ about the complex interaction between students support and benefits, in order to ensure they are claiming all they are entitled to.
- Students may have to switch between benefits and student support several times a year. One in 10 survey respondents had received an over or underpayment of their benefits as a result of the time taken to process new claims. These can leave students with huge debts or in serious hardship.
- Nearly one in five UK students say they find it hard to keep track of what they are entitled to throughout the year.
- Currently student loans in HE are paid in three unequal instalments throughout the year. Of the respondents who currently receive student support 56 per cent said they would prefer for it to be paid monthly, with a further 18 per cent selecting ‘weekly’.

The quality of information, advice and guidance available to students with children

- Nearly half (44 per cent) of survey respondents felt they had not been given sufficient information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent; 34 per cent felt they had been ‘to some extent’ – only 18 per cent answered ‘yes’.
- Students with children often feel that information about entitlements is untimely, inaccurate and conflicting.
- Students with children feel that benefits offices, student services and awarding bodies do not communicate effectively with each other leading to poor quality of information and mistakes in payments.
- Students with children often cannot access advice services in the same way as ‘traditional’ students.
- Student parents want information to be accurate, kept in one place, and to be provided before they start their course. 51 per cent of respondents want their university or college to provide this information to them via their websites.

Research findings

Inequality of funding

From a national policy perspective what is most striking about student parent funding⁵¹ is the inequality in terms of entitlement across sectors, ages, national boundaries and modes of study. This section outlines some of the key funding discrepancies.

FE

The Care to Learn programme provides 100 per cent childcare costs to all English and Northern Irish students with children in further education under the age of 20 (up to a weekly limit – see Appendix A); learners are also provided with funding for associated costs, such as holiday retainers, travel and deposits. Students over the age of 20 in further education in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland have no such entitlement and must apply for a limited amount of money which individual colleges have control over in terms of determining the criteria by which it is allocated. Scottish and Welsh learners under the age of 20 are not entitled to funding under the Care to Learn programme. In practice, this can mean that two learners born a few weeks apart can attend the same college, study the same course in the same class and have the same number of children, but be entitled to completely different levels of funding for childcare and associated costs.⁵²

Not only is this system unfair to those learners not entitled to statutory funding, but our research echoes the findings of previous studies which show that the level of discretionary funding available to learners in FE is insufficient.⁵³ At every college we visited it was reported that the money allocated for childcare for adult learners ran out early on in the year, leaving many students with children with no funding at all. In one college we visited, discretionary funds were gone in a matter of days.

National borders/NHS

Further inequalities can be found across national borders. Student nurses in Northern Ireland not only receive a lower bursary than nurses in the rest of the UK, but crucially they are not allowed to apply for the discretionary Support Fund, unlike student nurses in

England and Wales who can apply for the Access to Learning Fund (and who make up – along with other NHS students – a large proportion of applicants; see chapter five). One student advisor described student nurses in Northern Ireland as ‘literally dependent on charity’ in the face of harsh funding restrictions.⁵⁴

HE

Full-time undergraduate students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can access means-tested funding via the Childcare Grant. This has recently been extended to part-time students in Wales, but not England. Postgraduate students⁵⁵ and Scottish undergraduates (other than lone parents, nursing and midwifery students) are not entitled to statutory support at all.

Multiple children

Of those students who can access any childcare funding at all, the maximum number of children that most funding will cover is usually two (the exception being Care to Learn and the Sixth Form Childcare Grant). Around a quarter (24 per cent) of our survey respondents had three or more children, and those people have no choice but to fund additional places themselves.

Resentment

The complexities of government policy which lead to the kinds of discrepancies described in this section are generally lost to the individuals directly affected by such policies. Instead, the inequality can lead to resentment between students, who feel that the system is unfair. For example, one 20 year-old student we spoke to had decided to wait until her child was at school to return to college, unaware that her entitlement to funding would be dramatically altered because she had turned 20. A Scottish student we met said that she felt that decisions on bursaries awarded to students with children were “arbitrary”.

Hardship among student parents

In 2008 the typical cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two was £159 a week in England, £141 in Scotland and £142 in Wales. In England, that's over £8,000 a year; a rise of nearly 5 per cent on last year.⁵⁶

Childcare is expensive, and the vast majority of students with children will have to make a contribution towards their childcare costs during their studies, regardless of the sector they are studying in, the UK country, mode of study and age. As Appendix A shows, the contribution from students ranges from 15 per cent of total childcare costs (full-time HE undergraduates) to 100 per cent (postgraduate students and some FE students).

Many students we spoke to felt that the amount of funding they received was simply not enough to live on and did not encourage student parents to take part in further or higher education – 29 per cent of home students felt that higher benefits or student support would most significantly improve their experience as a student. They felt that they were being unfairly punished for wanting to gain qualifications and improve their earning potential:

“I dread the day that I will have to start paying back the loan with all the interest too, as well as the money that I will have had to have borrowed for living. Would I have been better off back as one of the unemployed statistics?” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Paid work

A significant number of students with children are engaged in paid employment in addition to their caring and academic responsibilities, although the proportion of student parents working is, understandably, smaller than the general student population.⁵⁷

Three quarters of those who work (77 per cent) said that they work ‘to cover their basic living costs’, and half (50 per cent) ‘to avoid getting into debt’. Students in focus groups talked about the need to work more than 16 hours to ensure that they received childcare tax credits for the hours they worked, as did 16 per cent of survey respondents who work.⁵⁸ These figures were almost identical for both part-time and full-time students.

We also spoke to some students in focus groups who were studying full-time in both FE and HE and who were also working full-time; eight per cent (75) worked more than 25 hours a week during the term as well as studying full-time.

We know that students with children are already time-poor in relation to many other students because of

their caring responsibilities. The level of participation in paid work evidenced in this survey and our focus groups, and its impact on student parents’ academic achievement, is therefore clearly a cause for concern.

Travel costs

In addition to childcare costs, focus group participants talked about a number of expenses they incurred as a result of being students with dependent children; the cost of travel was raised most regularly. Travel can often be incurred by childcare as a result of the lack of availability of registered childcare near to students’ homes or places of study. Only in the Care to Learn programme is guaranteed funding for such expenses covered (although some FE adult learners will receive some contribution towards this via the Learner Support Fund and HE learners via discretionary funds). The ESOL student parents we spoke to who received funding for travel were extremely grateful for the support, without which they would not have been able to take part in the course.

Travel costs can particularly affect students with children because of their lack of mobility in relation to institution choice; 92 per cent of the home students we surveyed had not moved house in order to attend college or university, and we didn’t come across any home students in the focus groups who had. Advisors we spoke to felt that it was less likely that student parents would be willing or able to move in order to study, which sometimes resulted in students living a considerable distance away from their institution. We came across several students in focus groups commuting distances of 50 miles or more a day, particularly in areas with fewer universities and large rural communities:

“The university I attend is approximately two hours travel from home. I travel daily and so funding for travel would make a big difference.” Student parent, University of Ulster

Funding for travel would be the one thing that would most significantly improve their experience as a student parent, according to 5 per cent of survey respondents.

Hardship funds

The proportion of focus group participants and survey respondents that had applied for and received hardship

funds indicates the extent to which students with children find it difficult to manage financially. Of those surveyed, 30 per cent of all student parents, and 42 per cent of lone parents, had applied to a discretionary hardship fund. Discretionary hardship funds are a lifeline to student parents struggling with multiple outgoings and insufficient income from benefits and student support. The majority of student advisors, academics and other interviewees we spoke to stressed the importance of discretionary funding in supporting students with children, whose needs were complex, varying and unpredictable.⁵⁹ Hardship funds, which draw on private funds, are particularly important for international students who have no recourse to public funds, though they are by no means universal and are only available at the discretion of the institution. Several international students in our focus groups spoke of their relief at being able to apply for such funding.

Access to Learning Fund (ALF)

Several advisors said that student parents use the Access to Learning Fund to fill the shortfall in HE childcare funding (the maximum available is 85 per cent of childcare costs), whilst one advisor noted that applications to the Access to Learning Fund had lowered significantly since the bursary system began in his institution, as people were using their grants to pay for the shortfall in funding. However, discretionary funds, such as ALF, are still a vital source of income for certain student parent groups. NHS student parents, for example, are usually one of the biggest single groups who apply to ALF because of their need to cover informal childcare costs brought about by irregular shift patterns, night shifts and placements. As the childcare chapter explains, this source of income is especially important because there is no statutory funding that parents can apply for to cover informal childcare. 9 per cent of survey respondents who had applied to the discretionary fund said that being awarded the funds was a deciding factor in whether to stay on their course. Despite this reliance, there have been progressive cuts to ALF allocations in recent years – 36 per cent overall between 2005/06 and 2008/09.

Applying for hardship funds

Several focus group participants drew our attention to

the positive way in which their applications were handled by “brilliant” welfare staff and administrators who are crucial in providing support to student parents. And when we asked students how they felt about the application process, 46 per cent of those who had applied said they felt “grateful”. Unfortunately, student parents’ experiences of applying to these funds are not always positive; 42 per cent said they felt “embarrassed” and 24 per cent said they felt “confused”. This chimes with the findings from the focus groups where several students gave examples of lengthy, intrusive application processes for hardship funds, which left them feeling frustrated and upset. A significant number of people were unaware of the existence of hardship funds, in particular, the Access to Learning Fund administered by HE institutions. Even more surprising, given the levels of hardship experienced by this group of students, several students in focus groups said the process was so upsetting or difficult that they would not do it again. Students highlighted the level of information they were expected to provide, which they felt was excessive.

Debt

Debt was a considerable concern for many student parents we spoke to in focus groups, both in terms of the student loan for HE students, commercial debt and borrowing from friends and family. More than half (53 per cent) of the students we surveyed had taken on debt, other than the student loan, because their living expenses exceeded their income (this rose to 61 per cent for lone parents). Examples of debt taken on by student parents includes, credit cards, overdrafts, catalogues, extended mortgages and bank loans. HE students especially highlighted the amount of student debt they would be in by the time they graduated as an ongoing worry, and several cited the figures that were ‘looming’ over them. Student parents discussed the cyclical pattern of borrowing they got stuck in:

“My credit card almost exceeds its limit and so does my overdraft, so I end up paying interest on it every month. I can only afford to pay the minimum payment for my credit card and I’m still using my overdraft up to the limit (£4,050) by mid-month of every month.”

Student Parent, University of East Anglia

Levels of debt are a particular concern for student parents from low-income backgrounds, whom previous research has found to be markedly debt averse.⁶⁰ Of the survey respondents who worked, 47 per cent said they did so to avoid getting into debt. The following quote illustrates this attitude:

“I’d never had debt in my life, I don’t believe in it. Now I am in loads of debt – not for a car or a house – just to get an education.”

Student parent, Kilmarnock College

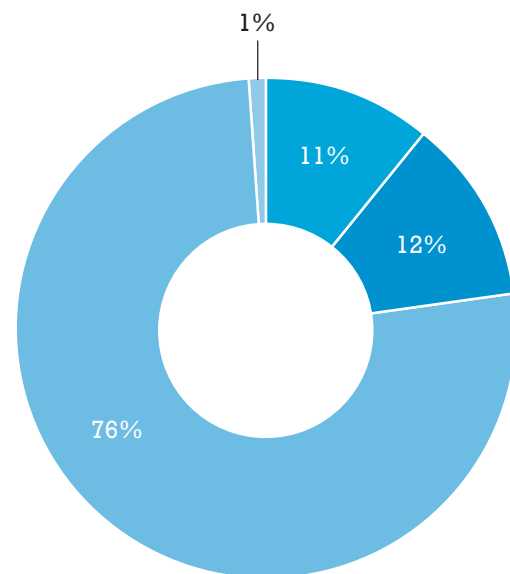
The majority of student advisors, academics and campaigners we spoke to also highlighted issues around debt for student parents. Several discussed the fact that student parents from low-income backgrounds were more likely to have pre-existing debt which they then had trouble paying back during their studies. Furthermore, this debt can only be used for the ALF assessment using the minimum repayment amount, assuming that the student is not continuing to use that source of credit.

Some students were genuinely concerned that they were getting themselves into thousands of pounds worth of debt without a guarantee of a good job. Student advisors also shared their concerns about what happens to students after they leave college or university, as advice and welfare services can help to keep creditors at bay during studies, but can’t do anything afterwards. However, the majority of students with children that we spoke to rationalised getting into debt by focusing on the prospect of future prosperity, on the understanding that participation in education would improve their financial prospects. Typical comments include one student calling the student loan “worthwhile debt” and another saying that future debt was not as bad as “being broke”.

Guilt, budgeting and “going without”

Students in several of the focus groups discussed the guilt they felt in relation to their children because of their financial situation. Students from both FE and HE talked about not having enough money for toys, treats or any extracurricular activities, which were described as “expensive luxuries” by one. More than half (58 per cent) of all survey respondents who worked did so to pay for such ‘extras’ for their children. Some were

Survey question: Do you receive any funding for your childcare?



- Yes, it covers all my childcare costs 11%
- Yes, but it only covers lecture or class time 12%
- No 76%
- Skipped question 1%

worried about the impact of hardship on their children’s attitude to education:

“I just hope our poverty doesn’t put our kids off studying.” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Students went to great lengths and made personal sacrifices to ensure that, as much as possible, their children did not “go without”. Many talked of developing detailed budgets which they stuck to rigidly, and also gave examples of ways that they reduced costs, such as buying reduced food from the supermarket and cycling instead of using public transport. Others used freecycle to replace household items. As we discussed in chapter three, however, the first thing to give for the majority of student parents was their own social life:

“I don’t tend to complain too much about money but it would be nice to be able to afford some fun now and again’.”

Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

“We have strict budgets and no social life but have started growing our own veg and making our own wine!” Student parent, University of Leeds

Research carried out for the Nuffield Foundation has found similar feelings of guilt amongst student mothers in relation to children going without.⁶¹

Lone parents

Several students spoke of the support that they received financially from their partners as crucial to their ability to take part in further or higher education:

“I received no funding for childcare, so all of my PhD funding each month was spent on childcare. I therefore had to rely on my partner to pay all other bills.” Student parent, University of Ulster

It is unsurprising, therefore, that lone parents, although eligible for more benefits, appear to experience higher levels of financial hardship than students with partners. According to our survey, they are more likely to be in debt (61 per cent compared with 53 per cent), less likely to be able to supplement their income through paid work, more likely to apply for hardship funding (42 per cent compared with 30 per cent), more likely to have sought money advice and more likely to run out of money at certain times of the year (32 per cent compared with 19 per cent). Lone parents can also face financial problems if maintenance is not paid by ex-partners. We spoke to several individuals who were paying off debts run up by previous partners.

Interaction between student support and benefits

When asked about the most serious funding issues for students with children, student advisors, academics and other interviewees were most likely to mention the impact of the complex interaction between student support and benefits. Students with children are some of the only students eligible for benefits, and only 22 per cent of UK respondents to our survey said they did not claim any benefits at all (this drops to six per cent for lone parents).⁶² However, we found that benefits agencies are

often ill-equipped to deal with the claims made by student parents, are unaware of the interaction between the benefits they receive and are entitled to and any student support they receive. To compound these problems, students with children are forced to enter and exit different funding streams throughout the year in order to access their entitlements.

Over and underpayments

Students have to sign on and off with the benefits agencies at various intervals throughout the year, but we found that this transition is rarely a smooth one. On the contrary, students and advisors reported serious problems associated with over and underpayments caused by the time taken to administrate these changes, which according to one student advisor, can be as much as three months. 12 per cent of home students reported receiving over or underpayments of their benefits. An FE student in Norwich said that the time taken to process applications means that “you can go through the whole summer without any money”. Another said:

“During the summer, when the children were on holiday, I had no money. It took nearly a month to go back on benefits and so I got into severe debt on my credit card and overdraft while waiting for benefits to come through. It completely ruined our summer holiday and I lost heart and confidence in my study as a result of all this.” Student parent, University of the Arts London

Overpayments in particular can cause real distress for student parents if they are left with debt as a consequence. We spoke to more than one student who reported a debt of £3,000 or over due to an overpayment which then had to be paid back over the course of their studies, in one case at a rate of £100 per month.

Overpayments can also occur when students continue to claim benefits whilst waiting for their student support (e.g. bursary or loan) to arrive, unaware that this is against the rules – or desperate because they have no other income to support their family. They can also be a result of the annual calculation of tax credits. Those students who do compulsory paid placements during the holidays may

have their tax credits calculated during this time which would increase their payment, but which would not be an accurate reflection of their ongoing income throughout the year.

Several advisors and parents spoke about local authorities cutting their benefits altogether whilst they investigated their entitlements. One parent explained the financial dire straits this left her in:

“I needed a few crisis loans for food before using a debt advisor because of stoppages in my benefit. This made me miss a few classes because I was stressed out about qualifying for the fund and not having money for lunch at college.” Student parent, Tychoch College

Managing the process

In order to ensure that the system works for them, students with children report having to be very organised and officious in ensuring that the benefits offices know their start and end of term dates, that payments are not made when they shouldn't be, that any overpayments are immediately paid back and that benefits offices communicate with each other. There was a general agreement amongst students, advisors and other participants that the onus was very much on the student to steer this process, and that the benefits agencies could not be “trusted” to get it right. A student from London South Bank University told us that she communicated this information via email, telephone and in person at the beginning and end of every vacation, as it was the only way she felt confident that she wouldn't receive high levels of overpayments. This system is time-consuming and inefficient for students with children and can create unnecessary anxiety.

Benefit regulations

One advisor said that the most common mistake she came across was benefits agencies telling all students that they are not eligible for benefits, and 14 per cent of home students we surveyed said that they had received incorrect information about benefits entitlement, as did several participants in our focus groups. One said:

“The Housing Benefit office admitted they knew hardly anything regarding HE student parent rules and made numerous mistakes.”

Student parent, Peterborough Regional College

Virtually every student advisor we spoke to agreed that benefits agencies were likely to get the entitlement wrong and regularly had to intervene on students' behalf to ensure that they were provided with the correct information. Three advisors we spoke to, working in different parts of the UK, said that they regularly sent student parents to the benefits offices with photocopied pages of the CPAG/NUS Student Support and Benefits Handbook as proof of their entitlements.⁶³ There was an acknowledgement, however, that the rules and regulations relating to benefits and student finance are so complex that it is almost impossible for benefits office staff to keep abreast of all the changes and interactions between the two:

“Benefits legislation must be one of the most complicated sets of legislation in this country... it's extremely difficult for people to navigate unless they are an expert.”⁶⁴

At the other end of the equation, it was suggested that “the system is fractured at the top”, with a lack of joined up thinking between policy makers at the DWP and DIUS. Several interviewees felt that students were not taken into account or considered when benefit regulations are changed and it is left to student services or students' union advice centres to do the work of sorting out the implications of such changes.

Job Seeker's Allowance versus Income Support

In the time that we have been carrying out this research, new regulations have been brought in as part of welfare reforms aimed at reducing the number of people on benefits and increasing the number of people in paid employment, which place conditions on those students with children who hitherto had claimed income support during the vacation. Lone parents with children under the age of 12 can no longer claim income support (IS) but must claim Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) instead. By 2010 this will further reduce so that lone parents must claim JSA when their youngest child reaches seven.

For many lone parent students IS is an essential supplement, particularly for adult learners on full-time FE courses or for full-time undergraduate students during summer vacations. It is also important for postgraduates who do not have access to other forms of support. Full-time students cannot claim JSA because they are not, by definition, available for work, so the net effect of the policy is to penalise those lone parents going into education by reducing their benefit entitlement – making them either poorer during the course or unable to take up the course at all. Part-time students can only claim JSA if they are willing to give up the course should it conflict with the requirements of any paid employment.⁶⁵

The negative effects of this can be seen in Scotland:

“The most difficult period of the year for us is the summer. Claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance for that short period of time is a nightmare, as you have to apply for jobs and tell the employer you’re only available for a few weeks. You also have to wait weeks to get any money. It’s really not worth the hassle!”

Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Timing of payments

Some (19 per cent) of UK respondents said they found it difficult to keep track of what benefits and student support they were entitled to throughout the year – and differences between how student support and benefits are paid can make it difficult to budget. For example, other than in Scotland, the student loan payment is made three times a year in unequal payments, a reflection – some interviewees suggested – of the image of a ‘traditional’ student living in halls of residence and returning home during vacations. On the other hand, the majority of benefits payments are made weekly or fortnightly. One group of student parents, studying for HE qualifications in a further education college, said that monthly payment of the student loan would make the biggest change to their ability to cope financially. Of the respondents who currently receive student support 56 per cent said they would prefer for it to be paid monthly, with a further 18 per cent selecting ‘weekly’. Advisors we spoke to pointed out that Scottish, NHS and teaching funding is already paid monthly and suggested that monthly payments would help students with children to budget.

The classification of student loan as income

Focus group participants and advisors often raised the issue of the classification of student loans as income for certain purposes, for example, in relation to housing benefit. The students who spoke about this felt very strongly that a debt should not be considered as income, and the deduction in housing benefit associated with this was felt very deeply. Student advisors also raised this issue. It was noted that the amount of student loan which is disregarded for benefits purposes hasn’t changed since 1991 and remains static at £10 per week, despite student loans in that time having increased from around £400 a year to over £4,000.⁶⁶

Several HE students in England and Scotland talked about the impact of losing housing benefit or having it reduced as a result of becoming a student. Those who raised this felt it was unfair that they had previously received both housing benefit and income support, and on becoming a student had transferred to a system where they were required to take on student debt in order to access any benefits:

“I was forced to take a student loan which decreased my housing benefit and has resulted in me being in debt. Non-students on income support are not required to take out loans in order to receive housing benefit!”

Student parent, Southampton University

Students felt particularly aggrieved that the amount of money they received via the student loan was no different to that received by students without dependents, despite the fact that their outgoings would inevitably be higher, particularly for larger families.⁶⁷ The increased costs of owning your own home were also raised by student parents in focus groups.

Information and guidance

The complexities of funding and benefit entitlement for students with children has a direct impact on the quality of the information provided to potential and current student parents. In every focus group we conducted there was considerable discussion about who was entitled to what, from whom, and sharing of information about what support was available. In some groups the confusion about the support that students were entitled to was acute.

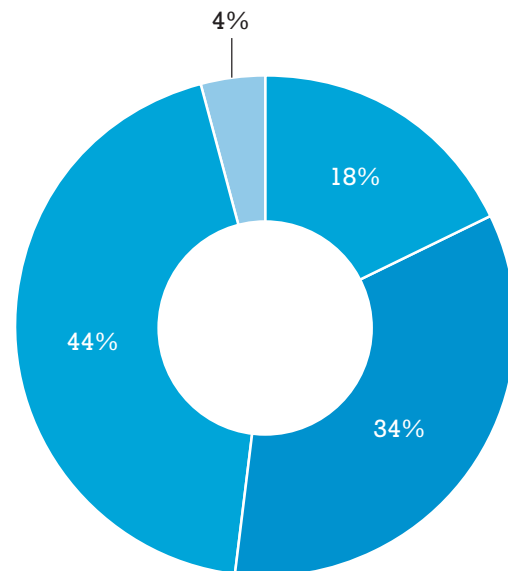
Students in both sectors overwhelmingly indicated that they felt the information they had received about their financial entitlement was inadequate, untimely and confusing. Nearly half (44 per cent) of survey respondents felt they had not been given sufficient information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent; 34 per cent felt they had been 'to some extent' – only 18 per cent answered 'yes'.⁶⁸ These figures were stable for international students and lone parents, as well as across HE and FE. Student advisors, academics and other interviewees corroborated this finding, and several suggested that in order to access all of the money that they were entitled to, students with children needed to be experts in both student finance and benefits.

It was felt by some student advisors that, particularly in higher education where the majority of courses incur debts, student parents were not given accurate and honest information about what life would be like financially as a student with children. Other research in this area has found that student parents feel that they have to 'chase' information⁶⁹ and wanted information that was tailored to the institution. This is especially important given that the majority of discretionary funds available to student parents are administered by the college or university, such as the Learner Support Fund and the Access to Learning Fund.

Students in both sectors emphasise the patchiness of information available for students with children, and we were told of numerous instances of students being provided with the wrong information by both local authorities and benefits offices:

“One major problem I have found throughout my studies is the lack of comprehensive information and advice on finance for student parents; the benefits office and student finance operate completely separately... and the different sources often give conflicting and incomplete advice. At the moment it's really difficult to find out what your financial options are and how different courses of action affect your funding.” Student parent, University of Leeds

Survey question: Looking back, do you feel you were given all the information you needed about your financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent?



- Yes 18%
- To some extent 34%
- No 44%
- Skipped question 4%

“The student finance available is a minefield. No-one seems to be clued up about it and I seem to get a different story every time I speak to someone.” Student parent, Swansea Metropolitan University

The lack of information leads to significant under-claiming in all areas. We came across too many examples to mention of students not claiming benefits that they were entitled to, not claiming the full amount of Childcare Grant, being unaware of childcare funding, funding themselves when they were entitled to student support, not applying for discretionary funds because they were unaware they existed and not applying for bursaries they may have been entitled to:

“I sometimes think I might be entitled to more money but it is such a lot of time and hassle finding out. With working I'd probably only be entitled to a small amount if any. It's not worth the bother.” Student parent, Staffordshire University

The lack of information about financial entitlements was discussed at length in every focus group we conducted. Individual students talked about having to “do a lot of investigating”, and that it was a “matter of me having to find out for myself”; one student from the University of Leeds talked about a “sea of conflicting information”. Students in both FE and HE were not confident that they were receiving everything they were entitled to and felt that there were probably pots of money they could be applying to that they did not know about. Students spoke specifically about their need for tailored, detailed information which was not relevant to the majority of students.

Advisors noted that they were only able to speak to people who could visit them in office hours, which often excluded those students on placements, as well as all of the student parents whose time on campus or in college is strictly limited because of childcare restrictions. A small number – 5 per cent – of survey

respondents said they could not get to their student services or advice centre when it was open.

Student parents were clear about the kind of information they needed. They wanted one resource which was accurate and which covered both FE and HE (as many students we spoke to were making the transition between the two). They wanted the information to clearly state how their benefits would be affected by student funding, which would give them accurate information about exactly how much money they would have as students and they wanted it before their course started. They wanted their universities and colleges to use that information and combine it with tailored information regarding institutional funds to provide them with a complete resource. When we asked students where they would prefer to access information about their entitlements, the most popular response was ‘university or college website’ (51 per cent of all respondents). Several students said that they would like to be able to call someone up who was an expert on student finance so that they could have confidence about the information they were receiving and could talk through their particular situation. Others wanted their institutions to proactively distribute this information to student parents.

Recommendations

“My family regularly have to bail me out till the end of the month. I pay this back on payday, knowing that I’ll need to borrow it back the week!” Student parent, Cornwall College

Student parents’ financial circumstances can vary greatly depending on where they live, whether they are part or full-time, and the level at which they study. Furthermore, local and national agencies often fail to work with each other effectively, leaving students to cope with the complicated relationship between student support and benefits and poor quality information, advice and guidance. The following recommendations focus on the improvement of funding mechanisms and processes to minimise hardship amongst students with children.

Equality of funding

- All students should have an entitlement to some level of childcare funding, regardless of age, mode of study, nationality or the sector in which they study.
- The HE Childcare Grant should be increased to 100 per cent of childcare costs, extended to part-time students and to adult learners in FE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government should consider introducing an equivalent means-tested entitlement in Scotland.
- Nursing students in Northern Ireland should be allowed to apply for help via the Support Fund.
- Additional funds should be put into the Parental Learning Allowance, LSF, ALF and Support Fund to cover the additional childcare costs that student parents inevitably accrue, other than formal or registered childcare. These should include travel costs for those who cannot move close to university for caring reasons.

Better interaction between benefits and student support

- Where an over or underpayment has occurred, and if a student has given sufficient notice of change of status, then there should be duty on agencies to negotiate a reasonable repayment rate with the student (and financial advisor). There should also be an appeals system in place to revoke over or underpayments where these miscalculations have not been the fault of the student parent.

- Benefits agencies, student services and/or students’ advice centres should meet at regular intervals to discuss changes to student support and benefit entitlements for students.
- DWP should reduce the amount of student loan regarded as income for benefit calculations in recognition of the fact that student parents’ outgoings are greater than students without dependents.
- DWP should restore lone parents’ entitlement to access benefits whilst studying, without the requirement to be ‘available for work’.
- The Student Loans Company (SLC) should make it possible for student funding to be paid monthly, as has been implemented in Scotland.

Information

- To achieve better joined up thinking, signposting and interaction between government departments responsible for student parents, there should be ‘check-off systems’ between, DIUS, DWP and DCSF. All three departments should consider the impacts on student parents in policy developments, and work together to mitigate negative impacts of these.
- DIUS, SLC, and the LSC should work together to produce accurate, reliable information for students with children covering both FE and HE. This should include dedicated staff, a centralised website and paper-based materials. Institutions should add to this to provide tailored information for prospective and current students with children that is available well ahead of enrolment, including realistic information on income and expenditure.
- DCSF and DIUS should fund a student helpline, potentially as part of ‘Parent Know How’, the existing hub of information for everyone in a parenting role.
- Every JobCentre should have at least one advisor who has been trained in the interactions between student support and benefits to reduce the numbers miscalculations of benefits entitlements.
- DIUS should review the financial support available for parents with more than two children, in order to assist their return to education.
- Debt management advice should be available for all adult learners in FE and HE.

A day in the life of a student parent

Katie's story

Early riser

My alarm goes off at 6:40am and I get up and have a tea to wake me up. At 7am I get the kids up, if they are not up already. Although I set an alarm the kids will get up before it, sometimes as early as 5am. If that happens, I try to get them to get in bed with me for a cuddle so I can have a bit of extra rest. Ella doesn't sleep well and can get up two or three times a night.



Rush hour

The next forty minutes is spent making sure the kids are all washed and dressed. At 7:50am I do Ella's hair – she hates having her hair brushed so it's a daily battle. If I have managed that, at 7:55am I make sure the kids have everything they need for school so at 8am I can drop them off at breakfast club. Luckily I live right by the school. I then come home, get myself ready for college, and make lunch if I have got time. At 8:30am, I leave for college, as I have to be there for 9am.

I'm then in college all day. I'm a course rep and so during the day I have my weekly meeting with the class to discuss any issues or concerns they have with the course or college.

Dinners, baths and bedtime

I generally get home about 5:40pm. I drop my bags off, have a cup of tea and start dinner. At 6:55pm, I leave to pick up the kids. My kids do gymnastics, cricket and cooking at breakfast and after school clubs, so I don't need to rush home to take them other places, which is very good. At 6:05pm, I get the kids home and out of their uniforms and put on a load of washing. Then I sit down with the kids and get their homework out of the way. Sometimes it can take ages to do homework with my son as he has learning difficulties. At 7pm, we sit down to dinner. It can be hard getting Ella to eat as she doesn't eat a lot and can take ages to finish her food. Around 7:50pm is time for a quick bath before their 8pm bedtime when I read a couple of books to them if I'm not too tired.

The end of the day

At 8:30pm I have a cup of tea and then clear up. I usually start my homework about 9:30pm and study for a couple of hours. At 11:30pm, I get my bag and uniform ready for college tomorrow. Then at 11:50pm, if everything has gone well, it's finally bedtime.

In case that sounded easy...

It doesn't always run as smoothly as this! If the kids are sick on a day I have college, I have to basically ring round the family and see who can take them. If no one can then I have to take the day off college.



5. Childcare



Summary

“I received my timetable on the first day of term. We have no childcare as it was far too late to secure places for so many children, so my husband and I take turns at missing college days to be there for them.” Student parent, Glasgow Metropolitan College

Students with children face a number of difficulties accessing childcare which is suitable for their needs. The national shortage of childcare places, high costs, a shortfall in childcare funding for students across the board, and the flexibility required by most student parents combine to ensure that student parents are disadvantaged from the offset.

Our research uncovered the following key issues:

- student parents struggle to find affordable childcare. This is exacerbated by the shortfall in childcare funding; 76 per cent of all respondents to our survey receive no childcare funding at all, and only 11 per cent say they receive enough funding to cover their expenses;
- student parents also reported a number of hidden costs associated with childcare including travel, retainers, registration fees, number of children;
- half of those who expressed a preference said they would prefer their childcare to be based near their home, with only 17 per cent preferring it to be based near their institution; students in rural areas reported difficulties accessing quality affordable childcare;
- students are not considered to be ‘good customers’ for childcare providers; they often need irregular hours, at awkward times and are subject to last-minute changes and late provision of timetables; providers may also have to wait for payment from strategy funding bodies;
- students who have to do compulsory placements have particular difficulties accessing registered childcare; placements can change from term to term and may require overnight stays, when registered care is unavailable;
- there is a shortage of suitable childcare for older and disabled children.

For all of these reasons, and others, informal childcare is an essential component of the childcare needed by students with children. At its best, it can be designed and

continues overleaf...

Summary (continued)

moulded around the needs of the parent and child, it can be cheaper (although is not necessarily so), and it can 'fill the gaps' left by registered childcare.

- 79 per cent of student parents we surveyed always, frequently or sometimes used family or friends for childcare in order to attend university or college; of those over a third (37 per cent) use it exclusively. One in five of all respondents pay for it, despite no statutory funding being available for such care.

- International students and lone parents are less likely to be able to access informal care when they need it, because of a lack of partner support and access to support networks.
- Eight per cent of student parents identified being able to access funding for informal childcare as the single change that would most improve their experience of education.

Research findings

The cost of registered childcare

It is well documented that quality registered childcare can be costly, with a full-time nursery place for a child under two in 2008 standing at £159 per week in England (£8,000 a year).⁷⁰ A place for a child in a summer play scheme is likely to cost £91.56 a week in England, £87.86 in Wales and £82.88 a week in Scotland.⁷¹ It came as no great surprise, therefore, when participants in focus groups all over the UK, as well as student advisors and academics, identified the lack of affordable childcare as a significant barrier to participation in further and higher education:

“The cost is unbelievably high, and you don’t get the quality of care you’d expect for the price.” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

The high costs of registered childcare are exacerbated by the shortfall in childcare funding for student parents; 76 per cent of all respondents to our survey receive no childcare funding at all, and only 11 per cent say they receive enough funding to cover their expenses.

The Childcare Grant

Students, advisors and academics alike questioned the fact that the Childcare Grant (CCG) currently only covers 85 per cent of childcare costs.⁷² It was pointed out that for full-time HE students the shortfall of 15 per cent can be a considerable financial burden:

“I only get 85 per cent (£148) back a week, but childcare is £171. Money is really tight in our family. I am finding it hard to find money

for childcare, travel and uni essentials, as well as paying bills and managing everyday life.” Student parent, Middlesex University

“My childcare is £5,600 (part-time for two children) and I get £2,450 childcare grant. It’s financially crippling me.” Student parent, University of Salford

Means-testing for the CCG also means that students can end up having to pay all of their childcare costs themselves, even if their income is relatively low but over the threshold for support:

“Childcare is incredibly expensive and takes up the majority of my student loan. Childcare funding should be easier to apply for, not means-tested and available to everyone with (any age) children.” Full-time student parent, University Campus Suffolk

Whilst it is clear that there are shortfalls in CCG funding, it should be noted that several advisors we spoke to specifically commented on the fact that before its introduction there was no specified funding in HE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This has freed up other government and charity funding to support specific needs currently not met by CCG. One guidance worker described the CCG as “a godsend”.

Discretionary funding

Part-time and postgraduate HE students are even less well off with regards to childcare support, with no entitlement to funding, and only small amounts of discretionary funding available from the Access to Learning Fund. Some students with children felt there

were merits to studying part-time (and, as we explained in Chapter One, the evidence suggests that most do), but in terms of childcare it can be problematic:

“My nursery fees are too expensive – £38 a day is too much on top of my rent, bills and living costs. The childcare grant⁷³ I receive per term doesn’t even cover a month of my son’s nursery fees.”

Part-time student parent, University of Greenwich

“Childcare eats up our small budget. I have my children in the minimum amount of time I can but the course is spread out over four days (with three hours approx each day) and it will still have cost more than £3,000 by the end of my one-year course.’

Postgraduate student parent, University of Bradford

In FE, where adult learners have no entitlement to childcare funding at all and what is available is distributed at the discretion of the college, high costs can be even more of an obstacle for student parents. The difficulties for adult learners in this context have been explored in detail in recent research carried out by the Daycare Trust.⁷⁴ The limited amount of LSF funding means that low-income parents may receive no help at all with childcare costs, leaving them to find thousands of pounds each year from other sources. In Scotland, the discretionary nature of childcare funding for all students can create anxiety for students there:

“Every year I am unsure if I will get funding for childcare until I have actually started my course and paid the first month myself, which I have to factor in when I work over the summer. Guaranteed childcare funding would make it a little less stressful to be a student.” Full-time student parent, University of Strathclyde

Location

Students make choices about where their childcare provider is located based upon a number of different factors, including the age of their children, whether and where they work, cost and what is available. Half of those who expressed a preference said they would prefer their childcare to be based near their home,

with only 15 per cent preferring it to be based near their institution.

There was a general consensus that campus-based childcare was good for young children, but as children reached school age it made more sense for their childcare to be nearer to their home or school. The key factor in many decisions seems to be the distances involved. One student summed it up when she said of her own childcare choices: “it all boils down to travel times really”.

Regardless of age, campus childcare may not be the most time or cost-effective choice if a student is on a placement that isn’t near their institution. Students on vocational and professional courses whose timetables and activities change on a regular basis may need their childcare to be based at different places at different times. Around one third of survey respondents who expressed a preference said that their childcare needed to be based at different places depending on circumstances.

Several parents living in rural areas, particularly in Scotland, specifically mentioned the importance of remote access to learning resources in order to help limit childcare costs because of the lack of reasonably priced childcare available in remote areas. Some student advisors suggested prices were especially inflated in city centres, thus meaning that childcare costs for those in universities and colleges in metropolitan centres had even higher bills to cover with the same amount of money.⁷⁵

Hidden costs

Student parents spoke about “additional hidden charges” they incurred as a result of using childcare, which for the most part are not recognised by funding. Childcare providers may expect deposits to reserve places, which may need to be paid upfront by students before they have received any payments of childcare or student support. One student parent was required to provide a cash deposit, another had to pay a deposit of £500 per child upfront. Given the problems with funding and hardship already mentioned, it is unsurprising therefore that this level of outlay can be an insurmountable obstacle for some students with children.⁷⁶

Many of our participants voiced concerns about covering the costs of holiday retainers to keep their child’s place in between terms. There was also some

confusion among some HE student parents as to whether the CCG could be used to pay for these retainers. We heard of one specific example where alternate week timetabling meant that student parents had to pay retainers for the days they hadn't used that week, but would need the next.

Other costs mentioned in our focus groups included the operation of a system whereby penalties were charged to parents who were late picking up their children. This was felt by students to be unavoidable on occasion, and fees were considered to be unnecessarily harsh. The cost of transport to and from childcare providers (either public transport or petrol) was also brought up numerous times:

“Debts have built up because I need a car to get my child to a minder and to get myself to college. Because of car costs (tax, insurance, petrol etc) my outgoings are more than my incomings.” Student parent, South East Regional College

These issues were even more pronounced for those who needed to travel to more than one childcare provider or for those parents who lived in rural areas.

The hidden costs outlined in this section, including deposits, registration fees, holiday retainers and travel to and from childcare providers are recognised by the Care to Learn programme, which reimburses them to learners under the age of 20 in England and Northern Ireland. The majority of other students, with some limited exceptions, have no access to any such costs.⁷⁷

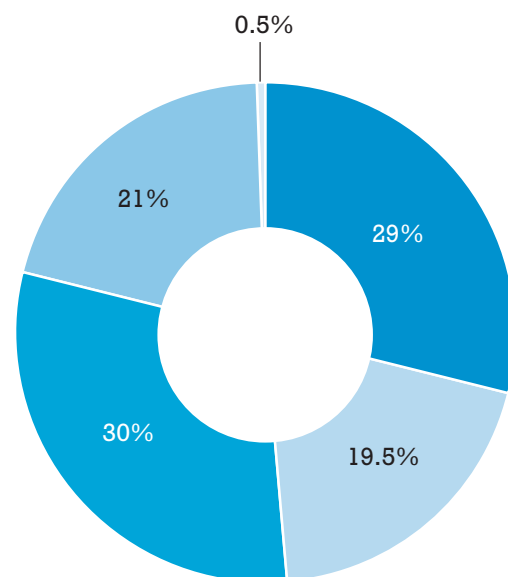
The costs of informal childcare

Our survey, interviews and focus groups highlight that informal childcare is widely and regularly used by student parents. Of our survey respondents, 79 per cent use informal childcare in order to attend university or college; of those more than a third (37 per cent) use it exclusively. One in five of all respondents pay for it:

“I am lucky enough to have my sister look after my boy for me so I can study and work. The downside to this is that I get no money to pay for her as she is family, so I have to pay her out my wages.” Student parent, South East Regional College

A few student advisors and parents alluded to the importance of informal childcare to many parents because it costs less than formal childcare. However, it is important to note that many informal childcare arrangements can cost just as much as formal arrangements – where grandparents have given up work or retired early to look after their grandchild, for example.⁷⁸ Costs for students using informal childcare may involve more than simple remuneration; for example, it may involve paying for a relative's travel. Some parents we spoke to tried to compensate their informal childcare providers with shopping, gifts or occasional payments when they could afford it. Others also spoke of wanting to be able to pay but not having the means to, or feeling guilty about not being able to pay. Funding for unregistered childcare would most improve the experience of being a student parent for 8 per cent of our respondents.

Survey question: Do your parents, partner or friends ever provide childcare so that you can attend college or university?



- Always 29%
- Frequently 19.5%
- Sometimes 30%
- Never 21%
- Skipped question 0.5%

Flexibility

“Registered childminders find students an unnecessary hassle, when they have a big list of working parents desperate for childcare that can pay the childminder directly, the correct amount, when required, without any bother.” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Timetables and last-minute changes

Student parents often find themselves in a position where they need to make last-minute changes or bookings with childcare providers because of alterations to their timetables. But providers are rarely able to be as flexible as student parents need them to be. Many we spoke to found the late provision of timetables a hindrance to their making childcare arrangements. Parents in our focus groups suggested that, ideally, a month was needed to arrange appropriate childcare, but only 16 per cent of survey respondents received a timetable more than a month in advance.

This uncertainty over being able to finalise childcare arrangements results in some student parents booking as much childcare as they can to guarantee they have childcare when they need it. This leads to them making large claims for childcare funding to ensure their expenses will be covered. Over-estimations of childcare can limit the funding available for other student parents who are reliant on limited discretionary funds, such as the Hardship Fund in Scotland or the LSF in England. For the individual, having to estimate levels of childcare needed and costs can have frustrating consequences:

“I had to ensure cover Monday to Friday, 9.00am–6.00pm. Now I’m paying for care I don’t need.” Student parent, University of Ulster

“I knew I’d be in uni on one of two days, but since I didn’t know which one I had to book the kids into after school club for two days instead of one, therefore costing me more money.” Student parent, University of Leeds

One FE student had her timetable rearranged at the last minute and was suddenly left with no childcare for the day she needed, and childcare she had paid for that she didn’t need, which the college refused to

reimburse. In this case, the student had to rely on family for help as there were no other options.

Students on vocational courses in particular need access to flexible childcare as their study periods, placements and holiday periods are likely to change from one semester to the next.

Irregular times

Student parents sometimes need to be able to access ‘one-off’ or occasional childcare. In the majority of our focus groups, inset days (teacher training days) and half-terms were flagged up as a problem. These can be particularly difficult for parents with children at different schools if the days don’t coincide.

On a more day-to-day basis, many students may only need a few hours of childcare here and there to cover lecture times, as well as irregular additional hours. This may be for the occasional extra lecture, to access the library, hand in assignments, take part in extracurricular activities or for extra personal study time (in the lead up to an assessment deadline). However, students reported that this kind of childcare was not really available. One student parent said:

“I want one or two hours a day for my three children. That’s not what childminders want. They want full days.” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

Several student parents spoke about a childcare facility that allowed drop-ins for an hour or two whilst they used the library or did some personal study; others suggested that this would be particularly helpful in half-term holidays. This was a service that some student parents would be willing to pay for by the hour. One student described this idea as “parental heaven” and suggested this type of service would encourage far more parents to return to education. Some students mentioned they would like this service to be located on campus so that they could use the library. One FE student in Northern Ireland had previously studied at an FE College where such a service was available and commented on how much easier this made her arrangements.

Unsocial hours

A number of students also mentioned the particular difficulties of trying to find childcare during ‘unsociable

hours', such as evenings or during the night time. There were very little, and often no, options for formal childcare outside of normal working hours. This was a particular issue for those on placement (see below), but also affected students with late lectures:

“I had booked my daughter into a nursery which the uni had recommended. However, I later found it didn't cover the hours that I could be in (it finished too early) and so after she'd been there one week I had to move her, causing her disruption. This also left me with a month's cancellation fees (over £500), which I couldn't claim help with because I needed the grants to pay for the new nursery.” Student parent, University of Cambridge

Several student parents in both HE and FE commented that they missed events and required parts of their courses, ranging from exhibitions and field trips to theatre visits, due to the fact that no childcare existed to match this need. One student parent described feeling under pressure because she was missing out on vital parts of the course:

“They (other students) get to go to all of these exhibitions. They have participated, so they are seen as proactive. And we are not seen as proactive because we are not participating in these class activities that they are organising – which we cannot attend because we don't have childcare.” Student parent, Kilmarnock College

After-school and breakfast clubs

Student parents in focus groups often spoke very positively about 'wrap-around childcare' provided by schools. The short after-school period when many students need help was not seen as an attractive option for childminders, so finding any formal arrangements can be difficult. As a solution to this, many student parents found breakfast and after-school clubs very useful. It was suggested that after-school clubs are often more flexible with timings and less likely to penalise parents for schedule changes or unavoidable lateness. It was apparent from a number of focus groups that after-school clubs were particularly important to those who don't have any networks to rely

on – for example, those parents who had no-one they could ask to pick up their child from school.

If government plans to roll out after-school provision in all English schools by 2010 are realised, students with children will benefit enormously, as currently after-school clubs are not services that are available to everyone. One student parent said that there were no after-school clubs in her area because it had been decided that there was no demand due to high levels of unemployment. Where they weren't available, student parents were left with limited options for pre-and after-school care. They were often left with no other choice than to leave lectures early or arrive late.

Whilst these services are also more likely to be relatively cheap, they aren't usually free, and a couple of student parents we spoke to were unsure as to whether the CCG could be used to pay for sessions or not. The typical cost for an after-school club is £43 for 15 hours a week in England, £38 in Scotland and £36 in Wales.

Availability

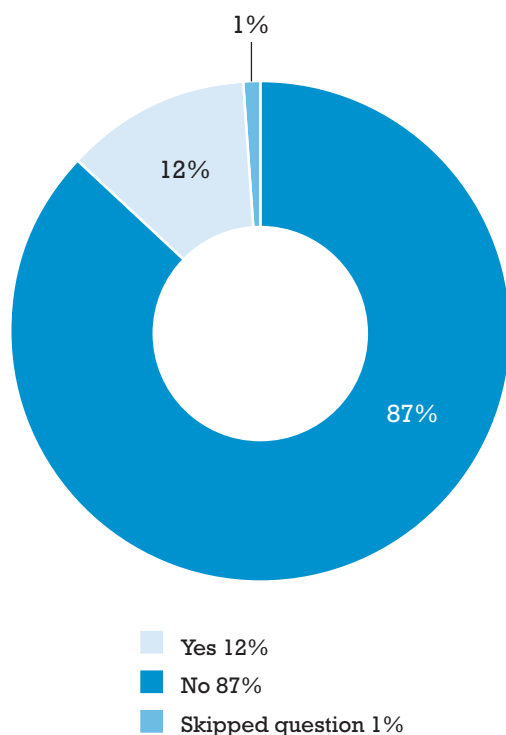
The national shortage of registered childcare places is a key issue with, on average, only one registered childcare place for every three children under eight.⁷⁹ The availability of information about childcare provision is another significant problem; only 14 per cent of those we surveyed felt they were given sufficient information about childcare options before they began their studies.

On-campus childcare

The availability of university or college-based childcare was raised by numerous students and advisors as an issue. Half of survey respondents said that they didn't need their institution to provide childcare, but of the remaining half only 8 per cent felt that their college or university fully met their childcare needs. Students and advisors we spoke to generally felt that, when it did exist, college or university-based provision was oversubscribed and there were often very long waiting lists. Several students we spoke to had responded to this by dropping out for a year to wait for their children to get to the top of the waiting list before enrolling again:

“When I rang the crèche I was told that I have to apply a year in advance to have any chance of gaining a place. As my child was unplanned I did not know to apply a year in advance, so

Survey question: Did anyone at your university or college talk with you about childcare options before you started?



“my mother has to stay at home every day to look after my son to allow me to attend my course.” Student parent, Northern Ireland

One reason for the high demand for places is that the facility is usually used by both students and staff and some students felt that having guaranteed places available would really help with childcare difficulties they face.

Childcare based in college or university can be especially helpful for some students – particularly those with pre-school aged children. Other benefits of this kind of childcare can be that staff are more used to working with students, they are better placed to fit around institutional timetables, they can cut travel time for students and it can be an easier to arrange payments between an institution and its own provider than with an external provider. Where campuses are based in city centres, college or university-run nurseries can also provide affordable alternatives to privately-run facilities.

Despite the benefits, it is likely that campus childcare

facilities are used by a small minority of student parents. It was pointed out to us by interviewees that there are resource (money, human, space) implications involved in on-campus childcare provision, and that it can be very difficult for institutions to expand numbers of places. For this reason, it is important that there is clarity as to the extent of childcare provision available and the number of places available for staff and students.

Placements

“The nursing course work placements are anything but child and family friendly. A single parent would struggle to stay on course – it’s hard enough for those of us with partners.” Student parent, Napier University

Compulsory placements and time abroad are course features which can create particular childcare issues for students with caring responsibilities. The former are standard parts of most health, teaching and social care courses, which, as we have already discussed, are likely to attract higher numbers of student parents than most courses (42 per cent of the students we surveyed had to do a work placement or spend time abroad as part of their course).

Students we spoke to in focus groups that had to do placements as part of nursing courses stumbled across the problem of not being able to access registered childcare (and therefore any funding) during the unsociable hours that they were expected to work:

“In September my daughter starts at university and childcare [for my younger two children] will become a bigger problem, as childminders don’t cover shifts, and both me and my older daughter will be doing placement hours. I haven’t come up with a solution yet.” Nursing student, University of Leeds

Previous research has shown that this impacts on nursing students’ retention.⁸⁰ Teaching staff’s responses to these problems was not always ideal. The student who gave the above quote was told by her lecturer to “ask her family for help”. This may seem like a flippant comment – but there does seem to be an expectation that NHS students will need to use unregistered childcare in order to take part in their course.⁸¹ The

prominence of NHS students in terms of applications to the Access to Learning Fund, and also to charitable funds such as ENEF, is further evidence of the financial strain placed on these students by the lack of funding for informal childcare.⁸²

Suitability

Older children

As one interviewee pointed out, childcare is not simply about babies. The majority of student parents we spoke to in focus groups that had school-age children still considered childcare arrangements to be a key concern. In fact, as children neared what one parent called “a funny barrier age”, problems with childcare could actually increase, due to the lack of suitable childcare available for children over the age of 10 or 11, echoing the findings of previous research in this area.⁸³ Parents had different ideas about when children no longer needed looking after, and most agreed it depended on the individual child. One parent with a child of 13 felt he was “not quite old enough to be given a key to the house”. Most agreed that there was “nothing for children over the age of 10”, and that while most after-school clubs had an age limit of 11, “you wouldn’t want to leave an 11-year-old at home on their own”.

Parents we spoke to suggested that it would be helpful if their children were allowed in college or university with them – we heard of several instances where children were banned from institutional buildings. This inhibits parents from popping in to return books to the library or hand in coursework without having to find childcare. Other parents suggested that it would be helpful if their older children could use facilities at the college or university when they were using libraries or other learning resources. Others discussed the possibility of after-school type clubs for older children based at colleges and universities:

“It would help my studies if they had somewhere to hang around at uni whilst I used the library for a couple of hours every so often.” Student parent, University of Leeds

“On-campus childcare for older children, such as activity or sports clubs during out-of-school-hours, would be useful to allow extra

study time where you can be confident that your child is occupied.” Student parent, University of Plymouth

Disability

One in ten student parents we surveyed said they had a child with additional support needs or who was disabled. Families with a disabled child have been found to pay on average five times more towards childcare costs than those with no disabled children.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it can be harder to find appropriate childcare which meets the needs of a disabled child. When we asked what would most improve respondents’ experience of being a student parent, one said:

“Having childcare services that are accessible to my children with special needs would help. At the moment I am restricted to short courses, as there is no childcare I could buy in, even if I was able to take up grants/funding.” Student parent, Open University

On top of this, students are unable to claim Carers Allowance if they are full-time, which several students with disabled children felt was unfair (since they didn’t stop caring for their disabled children just because they became students).

Informal childcare

The shortage of childcare places is a particular problem for students with children because of the limitations on funding upon which they depend, the majority of which is restricted to registered childcare. This has been identified as an obstacle for student parents in previous research, since for a number of different reasons informal childcare is often the only realistic option for students with children:⁸⁵

“I had to use informal childcare at the beginning because there were no other options.” Student parent, Hackney Community College

Lucky

When students spoke to us about their informal childcare arrangements, over and over again they spoke

about feeling “lucky” that they had supportive partners and ex-partners, parents, siblings, neighbours, older children and other adults who could help them:

“Luckily my eldest is a great help with the little ones and with my husband’s shift patterns and my parents’ help there are no real childcare worries.” Student parent, South East Regional College

Other adults help student parents by dropping off and picking up their children from school, looking after them in the evening to allow students to study, and even having them stay overnight. For example, we spoke to students who had set up rotas with friends to share school-runs. These are all services that are simply non-existent through formal childcare.

Guilty

Some parents felt guilty about the demands they placed on others, and their inability to compensate friends and family:

“I don’t have childcare costs, as my parents are there, but I do feel bad as I expect a lot from them and can give them very little in return.” Student parent, Heriot-Watt University

“I feel guilty... I think that parents and grandparents should be able to get some kind of allowance, because at the end of the day, as much as they’re not registered, they brought us up. I don’t think my mum should have to register her qualifications, because her qualification is bringing me up.”

Student parent, London South Bank University

A positive choice

Whilst the limitations we have described can leave students with no choice other than to use informal childcare, it is important to recognise that opting for this kind of care can often be a positive choice and not one only made out of desperation. A few parents we spoke to felt uncomfortable about registered childcare for very young children, who would be unable to tell them ‘if something was wrong’. We were also told about a student whose child has become mute as a result of

trauma, and who was looked after by a friend with whom the child felt comfortable. This parent was unwilling to change providers, and risk her child’s health, to access statutory funding, and so had to fund all of her childcare expenses herself.

Access to informal care

Whilst our research showed that informal care is central to successful childcare arrangements for students with children, it was also clear that informal childcare is not a luxury that all students enjoy. Around one in five survey respondents never asked family, friends or partners to provide childcare for them, and several individuals in focus groups elaborated on a variety of reasons for this. A couple of students were care-leavers who didn’t have the support networks that other students were able to access. Others had complex legal relationships with ex-partners and their families which limited access, and a significant number felt too guilty to ask parents, older children or friends to take on considerable amounts of childcare. For students who had moved to a new area to study, this problem was exacerbated by having left behind the friends and family upon which they previously relied.⁸⁶ International students were another group that several student advisors identified as not being able to depend on informal networks. Their situation is further complicated by having no recourse to public funds, which limits their ability to access formal childcare. Hence, for a significant number of student parents, there is no backup when registered childcare fails or when funding is unavailable. We found out from one college focus group that this led to a number of students unwillingly leaving their children at home alone on some days as there was simply no other solution to their childcare problems.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that student parents can access the childcare they need to participate in further and higher education, changes are required in thinking and practice at a governmental, institutional and students' unions level.

Government and funding bodies

- DIUS and DCSF, and their equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, should review childcare funding for students with a view to ensuring that all students are entitled to some level of statutory childcare funding (see recommendations on page 55 for more detail).
- DIUS and the Department of Health (DoH) should recognise the centrality of informal childcare as a positive and integral element which enables parents to study, and make a commitment to financially supporting students who need to pay for such care to participate in education.
- DIUS and DoH should produce a statement explaining how they are going to ensure students with children can participate in courses requiring overnight placements.

Institutions, local authorities and other stakeholders

“I had to book childcare for each day in case I needed it, and I had to pay for it for six weeks between school and university starting.” Student parent, Strathclyde University

- Institutions should reimburse students for any fines or costs related to late timetable provision or last-minute changes to timetable schedules.
- Institutions should work with Family Information Services, local authorities and schools to explore how these agencies could work together effectively to improve childcare provision.
- Institutions could explore involvement in the Extended Schools programme, including the possibility of hosting wrap-around care which would benefit students, staff and the wider community.
- Local authorities and institutions should work together to ensure that the Government's vision for childcare within the Ten-Year Childcare Strategy is realised. As part of their commitment to this, local authorities should use the findings of this report to ensure that

the needs of student parents are met in relation to affordability, availability, quality, flexibility and choice. This may include exploring ways of providing different forms of childcare including drop-in, short-term places, half-term 'playschemes', overnight and out-of-hours care to students with children.

- Students with children should automatically be prioritised in terms of placement location to limit the impact of undertaking placements on their childcare arrangements, and that these are organised first to give student parents as much notice as possible.
- Institutions should ensure that there is some emergency funding available for international student families, given that given that it is inevitable that some international students will have to bring their families with them to be able to study in the UK, or some will become pregnant while they are in the country.
- Those institutions who do have on-campus childcare facilities for both students and staff should make it clear in their publicity about the length of waiting lists for these services, and approximate ratios of student to staff places available.

Institutions and students' unions

- Institutions and students' unions should work together to provide detailed and accurate information about childcare provision in the local community for students with children. Particular efforts should be made to ensure that international students understand the considerable cost implications of bringing their children with them to the UK.
- Institutions and students' unions should work together to research the specific childcare needs of their students, given that these will change depending on catchment area, subject profile, age profile and number of international students.
- Institutions and students' unions should consider how they could facilitate communication between student parents, to allow them to establish alternative childcare arrangements when needed, such as baby-sitting networks, school runs and lecture cover. These would particularly benefit lone parents, international students and those who have moved away to study as they are less likely to have access to informal childcare.

A day in the life of a student parent

Natalie's story

Getting Up, Getting Out

At 9am my alarm wakes me up. I sleep with my son who is 13 months old and still breastfeeding. He's kept me up much of the night as usual so I'm shattered, but before I get out of bed I have to breastfeed him for 10 minutes so he drops back off to sleep. Then I grab my makeup and tiptoe downstairs to get ready.

Not five minutes after I've gone downstairs, Alex wakes up crying for me. This wakes up my daughter Lydia (3 years). Another 10 minutes pass where Alex loses his dummy and Lydia stubs her toe. I finally leave the house at 9.40am, grabbing a croissant on my way out of the door. I drive to uni and today I'm lucky and find a parking spot – often it takes much longer to find one. I rush to my first lecture and just make it just before 10am.

Housework and Homework

My lectures finish at 12pm when I rush back to the car and get home about 12.20pm. My husband's shift starts at 2pm so I drop him off and then we head to the supermarket. We shop mostly at Netto these days, as it's cheaper. I pile the children into a trolley and go around the shop as quickly as possible. We eventually make it home at around 3pm. After taking Lydia to the toilet, changing Alex's nappy, and putting the shopping away, it's time for a late lunch of cheese and ham sandwiches. After lunch, I pop the children down in front of the television (a bad habit I know) and unload the dishwasher. Then I hang out some wet clothes, and put a new load on. This all takes ages because Lydia needed the toilet again (three times) and Alex kept shuffling (he can't walk yet) into the



kitchen to find me. He's very clingy at the moment.

At 5:15pm I take the children upstairs and let them play in Lydia's room together (making sure the stair gate is shut!). I jump into the shower just next door. By 5.30pm, the children are getting sleepy. I take Lydia upstairs for her nap, and come downstairs and breastfeed Alex to help him settle off to sleep. Having done all that, I get stuck into a bit of studying for university. At 6:30pm I watch a bit of television. After it's finished, I do some more studying for uni until Lydia wakes at around 7.30pm. She's hungry but is being indecisive about what she wants. After the children have eaten, we play together a little. I'm teaching Lydia letter recognition at the moment, and I read a couple of stories to them both.

Books, Bath and Bed

8.30pm is bath-time; Lydia loves her baths, but Alex hates them and screams the place down. I get soaking wet and smacked repeatedly! Once that's done it's time to pick up Phil from work. We get home around 10.30pm and Phil gets Lydia ready for bed whilst I cook dinner. Phil and I sit down for dinner at 11pm. Alex is still awake so he ends up eating a fair amount of it! After dinner I load the dishwasher, hang out the washing, put a fresh load on and get Alex into his pyjamas. Then Phil and I settle down to watch television. This is the only part of the day when we spend any time together, though we're not technically alone as I'm breastfeeding Alex.

At 12.30pm I put Alex down as he has been asleep on my knee for a while, and then get about an hour's worth of uni study. I get ready for bed, and take Alex upstairs. I put him down in his cot and then get to sleep at around 1.45am until Alex wakes me at about 5am and joins me in bed.

Endnotes

- 1 HEFCE (2008) *Strategic Plan 2006–11* [online]. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_15/ [accessed 13/01/08]
- 2 Higher Education Policy Institute (2008) *Financial support in English universities: the case for a national bursary scheme* [online]. Available from: www.hepi.ac.uk/pubdetail.asp?ID=252&DOC=reports [accessed 13/01/08]
- 3 One Parent Families (2005) *Accessing Training and Education in East London: the Case of Lone Parents*. London: One Parent Families: 8
- 4 Analysis of Labour Force Survey data provided by the Learning and Skills Analysis Division of DIUS. The data includes parents in further education and sixth form colleges.
- 5 Callender and Kemp (2000) *Changing Student Finances: Income, Expenditure and the Take-Up of Student Loans Among Full and Part-Time Higher Education Students in 1998/99*. DfEE Research Report RR213. Norwich: DfEE
- 6 National Centre for Social Research and Institute for Employment Studies (2006) *The National Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2004–5*. DfES Research Report.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Callender et al. (2005) *Higher and further education students' income, expenditure, and debt in Scotland 2004–2005* [online]. Glasgow: Scottish Executive. Available from: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/10/26105054/50552> [Accessed 23/01/08]
- 9 National Centre for Social Research and Institute for Employment Studies (2006) *Northern Ireland Student Income and Expenditure Report 2004–05*, DELNI Research Report [online]. Available from: <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-stats/research-reports-2/northern-ireland-student-income-expenditure-report-04-05.htm> [accessed 23/01/08].
- 10 Dench, S (2006) *Impact of Care To Learn: Tracking the Destinations of Young Parents Funded in 2004/5* [online]. Brighton, Institute of Employment Studies. Available from: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pdflibrary/436.pdf> [accessed 20/01/08]
- 11 Callender et al. (2005)
- 12 Analysis of Labour Force Survey data provided by the Learning and Skills Analysis Division of DIUS.
- 13 Cappleman-Morgan, J. (2005) *Obstacle courses?: Mature students' experiences of combining higher education with caring responsibilities* [online]. Available from: http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/findings/ShowFinding.htm?id=PG/04/16 [accessed 08/02/07].
- 14 Interview with Nicola Summers (29/05/08)
- 15 Information provided by the Learning and Skills Analysis Division, DIUS (12/10/07)
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Wainwright and Marandet (2006): *An Analysis of the Learning Needs and Experiences of Students with Dependent Children at Brunel University* [online]. Available from: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/people/emma_wainwright [accessed 08/02/08].
- 18 Callender and Wilkinson (2005): 66–67
- 19 The 2000 Time Use Survey found that in the general population women spend more than twice the amount of time on childcare that men do. Available from: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/timeuse/default.asp> [accessed 23/01/08]
- 20 McGivney, V. (1996) *Staying or leaving the course*. Leicester: NIACE; McGivney, V (2003) *Student Retention in Open and Distance Learning: Understanding 'persistence' in adult learning* [online]. Available from: <http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=1887> [accessed 23/01/08]; Cullen, M. A. (1994) *Weighing It Up: a Case Study of Discontinuing Access Students*. Occasional Papers Series, 2. The University of Edinburgh Centre for Continuing Education.
- 21 Women were more likely than men to select the following answers when asked what their main motivations to study were: 'to set a good example to their children' (44% of women students compared with 25% of men students); 'to retrain after taking time out to raise children' (16% compared with 3%).
- 22 One Parent Families (2005): 7
- 23 One Parent Families (2005): 2
- 24 One Parent Families (2003) *Education, Training and Lone Parents: the role of education and training in the government's welfare to work policy*: 4
- 25 Research conducted for the Nuffield Foundation on recipients of Elizabeth Nuffield Educational Fund grants explores different causes of interruptions to student parents' education.
- 26 HESA [online]. Available from: www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com_datatables/Itemid,121/task,show_datatables/ [accessed 12/01/09].
- 27 Universities UK (2006) *Part-time students in higher education – supporting higher-level skills and lifelong learning* [online]. Available from: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/policybriefing0.pdf> [accessed 12/01/09].
- 28 Knox, H (Spring 2006) 'Can Part-time study contribute to widening participation?' Academy Exchange [online]. Available from: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/publications/exchange> [accessed 08/01/08].
- 29 See for example One Parent Families (2003; 2005); Wainwright and Marandet (2006); Cappleman-Morgan (2005).
- 30 This figure dropped to 25% (65) amongst male survey respondents.

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- 31 This figure drops to 43% for male respondents.
- 32 Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Claire Callender both noted this during their interviews. Recent research by NUS shows that 67% of students with dependents choose their University because it is close to home, compared with 28% of students without dependents. NUS/HSBC/GFK (2008) *Student Experience Report 2008* [online]. Available from: <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc> [accessed 12/01/09].
- 33 See also Wainwright and Marandet (2006). The Brunel study highlighted that some student parents felt alienated from the library because their children were not allowed in there.
- 34 It was also pointed out by some student advisors that this would benefit the rising number of students engaged in paid employment.
- 35 Tamsin Hinton-Smith also found that lone parents she interviewed in her research found deadlines after holidays particularly difficult.
- 36 Wainwright and Marandet (2006): 27–30
- 37 Quimby and Brien agree; their concept of ‘verbal persuasion’ positions face-to-face contact as central to student retention amongst non-traditional students, who are likely to suffer from low self-esteem and question their academic ability. Quimby and Brien (2006) ‘Predictors of Well-Being among Non-Traditional Female Students with Children’, *Journal of Counselling and Development*.
- 38 Just under a third (29%) of the student parents we surveyed have been out of education for 10 or more years; 16% had not been in formal education for between five and 10 years; 14% between two and five years and the remainder between zero and two years.
- 39 The Brunel study also found that one in six respondents cited a ‘lack of understanding and support from staff’ as a problem. Wainwright and Marandet (2006).
- 40 Interview with Tamsin Hinton-Smith (06/03/08)
- 41 This figure goes down to 35% for international students who are the obvious exception to the general pattern that student parents have established lives.
- 42 Research conducted for the Nuffield Foundation on recipients of Elizabeth Nuffield Educational Fund grants.
- 43 Interview with Alison Urquhart (29/05/08)
- 44 Wainwright and Marandet (2006)
- 45 Interview with Tamsin Hinton-Smith (06/03/08)
- 46 Equality Challenge Unit (2008) *Inclusive Students’ Unions*; Wainwright and Marandet (2006); Leeds University Union *Diversity Report* (2007)
- 47 Utley A. (2002) ‘Lonely students quit as hard-up hang on’ *Times Higher*, 13 September. See also Metcalf (1993) and Cullen (1994); both studies reinforce the importance of a sense of ‘belonging’ to student success.
- 48 Equality Challenge Unit (2008): 14–17
- 49 Leeds University Union (2007)
- 50 Interview with John Muir (05/02/08)
- 51 ‘Student parent funding’ refers to all statutory sources of funding which support students with children. This includes funding that is available for childcare, travel, course-related costs and housing.
- 52 There is funding available for adult parents in Sixth Form Colleges in England, but these account for a tiny minority of adult learners.
- 53 Recent research by the Daycare Trust highlighted the gravity of the situation for adult learners, and found that their experience of funding was insecure, incomplete and inaccessible. Daycare Trust (2007) *Childcare for Adult Learners in Further Education*. London: Daycare Trust. The Daycare Trust has called the situation in FE ‘an affordability crisis’ which is excluding ‘further education students and parents of under threes who want to train’.
- 54 Interview with Connie Craig (13/10/08)
- 55 Other than PGCE students who can claim as for full-time undergraduates.
- 56 Daycare Trust (2008) *Childcare Costs Survey 2008* [online]. Available from: http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/mod/filemanager/files/Cost_survey2008.pdf [accessed 12/01/08]
- 57 A recent survey of HE students found that only 20% of all students did not work either in term time or holidays; this figure rose to 54% students with dependents. NUS/HSBC/GFK (2008): 69–70.
- 58 Queen’s University Belfast tried to impose a 15-hour limit for paid work for students but were prevented from doing so after the students’ union used ‘Section 72’ (not discriminating against people with children) to highlight the fact that the limitation would prevent student parents from being able to access working tax credits for childcare.
- 59 We heard about several instances where students had received hardship funding for things such as rewiring a house, paying to get the car or washing machine fixed, or in one case to pay for a buggy so that the student didn’t have to carry her toddler to college.
- 60 Callender and Jackson (2005) ‘Does the fear of debt deter students from higher education?’ in *Journal of Social Policy* (34:4) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 61 Research conducted for the Nuffield Foundation on recipients of Elizabeth Nuffield Educational Fund grants.
- 62 Home students with children are eligible to access benefits; international students do not have any recourse to public funds. 3% of lone parents did not access any benefits and do that Benefits that can be accessed include income support, child tax credits, child benefit (available for all parents), Jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) and working tax credits. We did not ask
-

students whether they claimed Child Benefit since this is a universally-available benefit to anyone with children.

- 63 Child Poverty Action Group/National Union of Students (2008) *Student Support and Benefits Handbook: England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. London: Child Poverty Action Group
- 64 Interview with Paul Norman (29/02/08)
- 65 The DWP has recognised to some extent this issue by extending transitional protection to students claiming IS when the rules change until the end of their courses, but for those that follow there is no such protection.
- 66 Interview with Connie Craig (13/10/08)
- 67 Tamsin Hinton-Smith reported that lone parents she had spoken to for her research resented the threshold for loan repayments being the same for all regardless of outgoings.
- 68 4% did not answer the question
- 69 Wainwright and Marandet (2006)
- 70 See the 'Money Matters' chapter for details of prices across the UK.
- 71 Daycare Trust (2008) *Childcare Costs Survey 2008* [online]. Available from: http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/mod/fileman/files/Cost_survey2008.pdf [accessed 12/01/09]. The report also noted that more than two thirds of Children's Information Services in England responded that parents have reported a lack of affordable childcare in their area.
- 72 The Childcare Grant is currently only available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 73 Part-time HE students may be able to access childcare funding of between £250 and £750 per family per year from the Access to Learning Fund. This amount is decided and administered by individual institutions.
- 74 Daycare Trust (2007)
- 75 In some parts of the country, particularly London and the South East, the cost of a nursery place is much higher – typically £200 a week in London or £179 a week in the South East.
- 76 A survey of parents in 2005 shows that a third of parents think that childcare is not affordable, with cost reported as a barrier to childcare use (and work) particularly among low income families and lone parents.
http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/mod/fileman/files/Childcare_Today_Nov_2006.pdf
- 77 Some HE undergraduate students will also be able to access the parents' learning allowance, a one-off payment of approximately up to £1,470. This is intended to help cover course-related costs, which can include the hidden costs of childcare provision.
- 78 Thanks to Hilary Land sharing this observation with us.
- 79 Daycare Trust (2006) *Childcare Today* [online]. Available from: <http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/article.php?sid=291> [accessed 12/01/09].
- 80 19% of respondents to an RCN survey about nursing students cited childcare as a reason they had considered leaving their course. RCN (2008) *Nursing our future: An RCN study into the challenges facing today's nursing students in the UK*. London: RCN.
- 81 Tamsin Hinton-Smith, in her research looking at the experiences of lone parents in HE, came across similar issues. Students she spoke to said they weren't prioritised for local placements, so it was difficult for them to get to placements on time and staff were not always understanding of their predicament.
- 82 Unison recently surveyed students in receipt of NHS bursaries and found that 76% of those who expressed a preference believe that the childcare allowance should be available for payment of non-registered childminders. Approximately 26% of students who stated a position indicated that they are currently unable to access the allowance due to inability to find a registered childminder.
- 83 Buck, K. and 4 Children (2007) *Still Home Alone?* [online]. Available from: <http://www.4children.org.uk/information/show/ref/1090> [accessed 12/01/09].
- 84 Daycare Trust (2007) *Listening to Parents of Disabled Children about Childcare*. London: Daycare Trust.
- 85 Land et al. (2000) *ENEF: 45 Years of Plugging the Gaps in Women's Education*. SPS/Nuffield Foundation.
- 86 Tamsin Hinton-Smith's research also found that lone parents who move away to study lose their support network, and then get caught in a vicious circle where having no one to rely on puts extreme constraints on their time and their ability to develop new networks.

Appendix A

Funding index

	Full time undergraduates	FE students under 20	FE students over 20	NHS/Healthcare students
England	<p>Student Loan Up to £6,475pa. Low interest rates; repaid incrementally based on salary after graduation.</p> <p>Maintenance Grant/Special Support Grant Up to £2,835 based on household income.</p> <p>Childcare Grant For full-time students with dependent children aged up to 16, registered childcare. 85% of costs up to £175pw (1 child) or £300pw (2+ children) For term time and holidays. This does not affect benefits.</p> <p>Parents Learning Allowance Up to £1465pa.</p> <p>Access to Learning Fund Additional discretionary support for students on low incomes, including part-time and postgraduate students, can be used for informal childcare.</p>	<p>Education Maintenance Allowances Up to £30pw based on family income.</p> <p>Care to Learn Up to £160 of actual costs per child pw (£175 per child pw in London).</p> <p>Learner Support Fund Discretionary fund administered by individual learning providers – cannot be used to support informal childcare.</p> <p>New Deal for Lone Parents Cost of course plus £100 per week for one child or £150 per week for two children or more.</p> <p>Career Development Loan 18 plus – interest charged at commercial rates, though paid by Government during course. Loan must be repaid once course is finished.</p>	<p>Adult Learning Grant Up to £30 per week – available for students over the age of 19 on a low income.</p> <p>Sixth Form Childcare Grant As Care to Learn but means-tested and only available in sixth form colleges.</p> <p>Learner Support Fund Discretionary fund administered by individual learning providers – cannot be used to support informal childcare.</p> <p>New Deal for Lone Parents Cost of course plus £100 per week for one child or £150 per week for two children or more.</p> <p>Career Development Loan Interest charged at commercial rates, though paid by Government during course. Loan must be repaid once course is finished.</p>	<p>NHS Bursary Up to £7,629pa – diploma level study Up to £3,306 – degree level study.</p> <p>NHS Childcare Allowance 85% of costs up to £145pw (1 child) or £215pw (2+ children). This is available for 52 weeks (i.e. the whole year).</p> <p>Parents' Learning Allowance £1,076pa – diploma level study Up to £1,270pa – degree level study.</p> <p>Dependents' Allowance Diploma level: first child – £2,181pa other children – £525pa each. Degree level: first child – £2,573pa other children – £525pa each.</p> <p>Access to Learning Fund Additional discretionary support for students on low incomes, can be used for informal childcare.</p>
Scotland	<p>Student Loan Up to £6,475pa. Low interest rates; repaid incrementally based on salary after graduation Young Students Bursary Up to £2,575 (under 25s only).</p>	<p>Education Maintenance Allowances Up to £30pw based on family income. Dependents' Allowance £49,48pw.</p>	<p>FE Bursary Up to £86,81pw. Dependents' Allowance £49,48pw.</p>	<p>Nursing/Midwifery Bursary £6,411pa. Childcare Allowance Up to £1,185pa.</p>

Funding index (continued)

	Full time undergraduates	FE students under 20	FE students over 20	NHS/Healthcare students
Scotland (continued)	Lone Parent Grant £1270pa. Lone Parent Childcare Grant £1185pa. Hardship Fund Discretionary funds available through HEI; specific allocation for childcare funding. Travel Expenses	Childcare Fund Discretionary funds available through learning provider. Working for Families	Childcare Fund Discretionary funds Available through learning provider. Working for Families	Single Parent Allowance £1,270pa. Dependents' Allowance first child – £2,573pa other children – £525pa each. Other healthcare professionals are eligible for separate, reduced funding.
Wales	As England, except the CCG is also available pro-rata to those studying at least 50% of a full-time course.	Education Maintenance Allowances Up to £30pw based on family income. Hardship Fund Discretionary fund administered by individual learning providers. New Deal for Lone Parents Cost of course plus £100 per week for one child or £150 per week for two children or more. Career Development Loan 18 plus – interest charged at commercial rates, though paid by Government during course. Loan must be repaid once course is finished.	Assembly Learning Grant Available for part-time and full-time learners from low-income backgrounds. A payment of up to £1500. Hardship Fund Discretionary fund administered by individual learning providers. Genesis Wales New Deal for Lone Parents Cost of course plus £100 per week for one child or £150 per week for two children or more. Career Development Loan Interest charged at commercial rates, though paid by Government during course. Loan must be repaid once course is finished.	As England
Northern Ireland	As England, except maintenance/special support grant is up to £3,335.	Education Maintenance Allowances Up to £30pw based on family income.	FE Awards Awarded on a first come first serve basis; bursary of £2000pa.	Nursing/Midwifery Bursary £5,910pa.

	Full time undergraduates	FE students under 20	FE students over 20	NHS/Healthcare students
Northern Ireland (continued)		<p>Care to Learn NI Up to £165 of actual costs per child pw.</p>	<p>Childcare Support Can pay for up to 85% of childcare costs, up to a maximum of £185 a week for one child and £300 for two or more children, and can also be used to pay for holiday retainers and right).</p> <p>Hardship fund Means-tested hardship fund can be used to cover childcare costs or deposits in the period before the FE Award becomes available, or to cover the 15% not met by the FE award.</p>	<p>Dependents Allowance First child £2,220 other children – £525pa each.</p> <p>Parent's Learning Allowance £1,100.</p> <p>Contribution to childcare Up to £1,215pa.</p> <p>Other healthcare professionals are eligible for separate, reduced funding.</p>

* Information correct at time of going to press. Rates are for new students in the 2008/09 academic year.

Some separate funding is available for social work students, initial teacher training students, and dance and drama students in private colleges.

Postgraduate students do not receive any statutory support unless they are studying PGCEs, in which case they can claim as for full-time undergraduates. Research Councils provide limited numbers of studentships which may offer additional support for student parents.

Part-time undergraduates do not receive any specific support for children, other than in Wales

where the Childcare Grant is offered on a pro-rata basis to those studying at least 50 per cent of a full-time equivalent course.

All student parents can claim child tax credit (subject to income, though most student income including student loans and grants is disregarded), working tax credit childcare element (subject to eligibility criteria, and you cannot claim WTCCE as well as the CCG), child benefit and possibly other SS benefits, and will have access to hardship funds at the university or college.

Appendix B

The Survey

Between October and December 2008, NUS asked students with children in both further and higher education to complete an online survey about their experiences. The survey received 2167 completed responses.

When discussing individual questions, 'respondents' refers to the total sample of 2167 students, unless otherwise specified. Respondents were not required to answer all questions. Response count as well as percentage is given to ensure clarity when necessary.

Background information about participants

87% of respondents (1894) were women, and 12% (259) were men, with 0.4% (9) preferring not to select an answer. The vast majority of respondents – 93% (2007) – were home students, whilst 7% (160) were international. 76% (1639) are currently studying in England, 9% in Scotland, 8% in Northern Ireland, and 7% in Wales. Minority ethnic groups are overrepresented in the survey with only 69% (1487) of respondents describing themselves as white British, which compares with 87.5% of the general population. Some of this – although not all – can be accounted for by the high proportion (89%) of international students identifying as a minority ethnicity (6% of all respondents; 140).

Whilst the vast majority (75%) were aged between 26 and 45 years old, more than one in ten – 11% of respondents were aged under 25.

Just over half of survey participants describe themselves as Christians (53%; 1151), with around a third saying they have no religion; 5% are Muslim, and 39 respondents identified themselves as either Hindu, Sikh, Jewish or Buddhist. 5% opted not to select a religion. 59% of respondents live with a partner and their children, while around a third (34%; 730) were lone parents living on their own with their children. A further 5% live with their parents and their children. Roughly equal numbers of respondents had either one or two

children (39% and 38% respectively). 15% have three children, with the remaining 8% having between four and eight children. The overwhelming majority live with their children all of the time, with only 5% sharing custody or not living with their children. Just under a third (29%) have been pregnant at the same time as being a student.

15% consider themselves to have a long-term health condition that affects their day-to-day life, whilst 9% describe themselves as disabled. 11% say they have a child with additional support needs or a disability. 4% (95) claim disability living allowance.

Teaching and Learning

72% of student respondents are studying full-time, and 27% part-time. The majority (71%; 1529) are working towards Level 4 qualifications, with 20% studying at postgraduate level, and 6% at Level 3. 2% were studying for Level 1 or 2 qualifications.

88% of respondents (1909) are studying in higher education institutions at 138 different institutions; of these only one in five were studying at a Russell or 1994 group institution (14% (275) and 8% (156)).

12% (258) of respondents were studying in further education colleges, with respondents studying at 132 different colleges. Of these, 41% (107) were studying for HE qualifications.

Of those studying FE courses in FE colleges, 22% (33) students selected 'Health/Social Care/Public Services' as their area of study, with 16% selecting 'Business/Administration/Management'.

For student parents studying for HE courses at university, the most popular categories were 'Medicine', 'Dentistry' or 'subjects allied to Medicine' (19%; 359), 'Social Studies, including Economics and Politics' (15%; 285), 'Education' (14%; 261) and 'Biological Sciences including Psychology' (10%; 195).

Of the 107 students who were studying for an HE qualification in an FE college, around one in five (22) selected 'Business and Administrative Studies', 16%

(17) 'Social Studies including Economics and Politics', 10 respondents (9%) selected 'Medicine', 'Dentistry' or 'subjects allied to Medicine' and 8 (7%) selected 'Education'

42% of all respondents also confirmed that they have to spend time abroad or do a compulsory work placement as part of their course.

Motivations to learn

Respondents were asked to select their top three reasons for entering further or higher education. Half of respondents were motivated to study in order to gain qualifications (52%), to get a more fulfilling job (53%) and/or to improve their earning potential (50%). 46% were motivated by an interest in the subject and 42% wanted to set a good example for their children. 15% wanted to retrain after time out of the job market raising children

60% (1297) of respondents answered 'yes' to the question 'have you ever thought about giving up your course? When we asked what had made them stay, the majority selected 'personal ambition' (1036). Others cited encouragement and support from friends and family (755), creating financial security for their children in the future (753), and needing to complete the course to get a better job (746).

When and where students with children study

We asked students when they did most of their personal study; respondents were able to select as many options as necessary. Students with children tend to study in the evening (67% between 7 pm and 10 pm) or during the night (59% after 10 pm). 39% (846) do not feel able to use learning resources as much as they would like; of these, 42% cite the lack of childcare for personal study time as one of the factors that limits their use of such resources, 38% say children are not allowed in the resources and around a quarter (218) cite inconvenient opening hours.

The majority (85%; 1833) of student parent respondents mainly use a computer in their own home to study, with only 9% using a university or college computer for most of their work. Of those who use their own computer, around two thirds do so because they do not have sufficient childcare to work at university or college.

Benefits

22% of survey respondents do not claim any benefits at all; the benefit that most respondents claim are child tax credits (1430). Around one in five also claim working tax credit (449) and housing benefit (434). Only 6% of lone parents in our sample did not claim any benefits at all.

Work and debt

38% of all respondents said that they do not work, and do not intend to work during the holidays. 26% work during term time only (566) and 4% work during the holidays only (90). 15% (334) work during both term time and holidays.

44% of all respondents who work say they do so to cover their basic living costs (953); the second most popular reason for working is to pay for 'extras' for children such as toys, parties and school trips (734). 28% say one of the reasons that they work is to avoid getting into debt. Despite this, 53% (1157) of all respondents said that they had taken on debt, other than the student loan, because their living expenses exceeds their income. 8% (178) do so in order to reach the minimum number of hours needed to acquire tax credits to help with childcare costs.

Just under a third of respondents (30%; 644) had applied to a discretionary fund such as the Access to Learning Fund, the Learner Support Fund or the Hardship Fund, of whom just under a half are lone parents (48%; 309). Of all applicants, roughly equal numbers said they felt grateful and/or embarrassed by the application process (297 and 268). 156 respondents said they found the process confusing, and a similar number described it as frustrating (189).

Childcare

76% (1647) of respondents do not receive any funding for childcare costs at all, and 12% receive funding which covers lecture or class time only. 11% receive funding which covers all of their costs; of these, over half are lone parents (130). Virtually all of those with full funding are home students (97%). 89% (213) are higher education students; only 17% of those studying level one to three courses in FE colleges receive full funding (25 out of 151). 90% of those who receive full funding (215) are full-time students (compared with

72% of all respondents), and 81% study in England (5% more than the sample average).

92% of respondents studying part-time receive no childcare funding at all (543 out of 593), and neither do 74% of respondents studying in Scotland. 77% (1559) of all higher education students (including those studying in colleges) and 67% of FE respondents (101 out of 151) receive no funding for childcare at all.

Informal Childcare

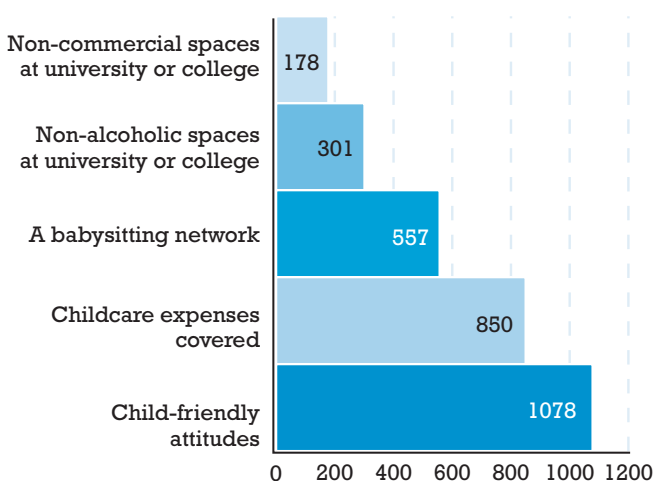
Four out of five respondents rely on informal childcare to allow them to attend college or university sometimes, frequently or always. Of those, 26% (445) pay family or friends to provide such care.

Only one in five never uses this kind of childcare in order to go in to college or university.

Only 89 respondents (4%) said that their university or college provides suitable childcare facilities for their needs, though only 15% of respondents said that they would prefer their childcare to be based near their college or university. 44% (962) would prefer for their childcare to be located near their home, with over a quarter (27%) stating that this changes depending on circumstances.

Student Life

Survey question: What would make it easier to become involved in university or college life?

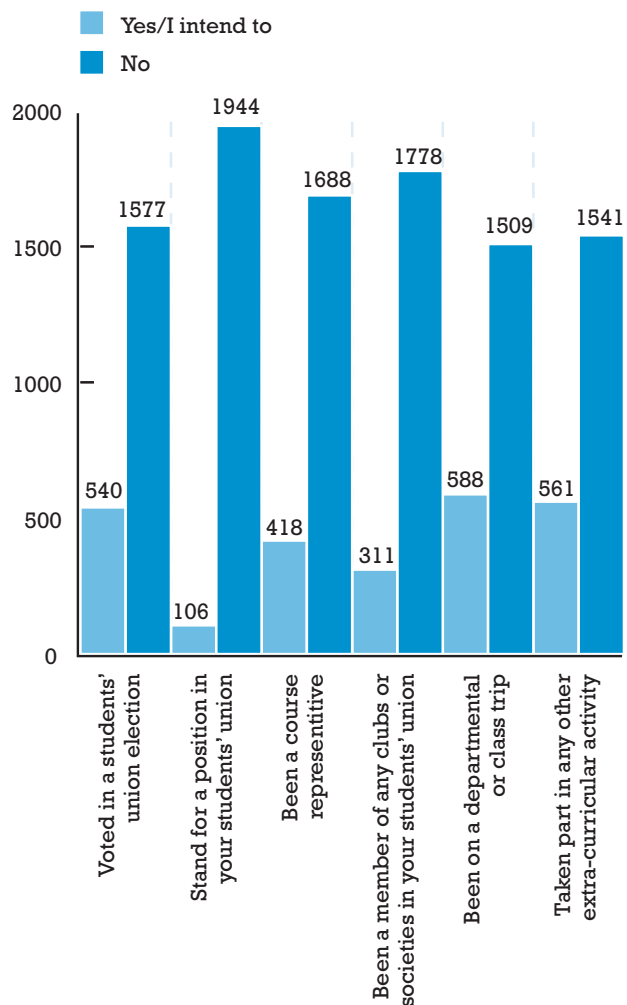


Socialising and peer networks

Just over half of all respondents mainly socialise with people outside of university and college (52%; 1135). Only one in 10 (212) say that they socialise mainly with friends from university or college. Over a third of all respondents say they do not feel they have the time to socialise. 54% say they would like to be supported to meet up with other student parents.

Over three quarters (77%; 1660) feel that it is difficult for a student parent to become involved with university or college life. This rises to 81% for lone parents.

Survey question: Have you ever done any of the following?

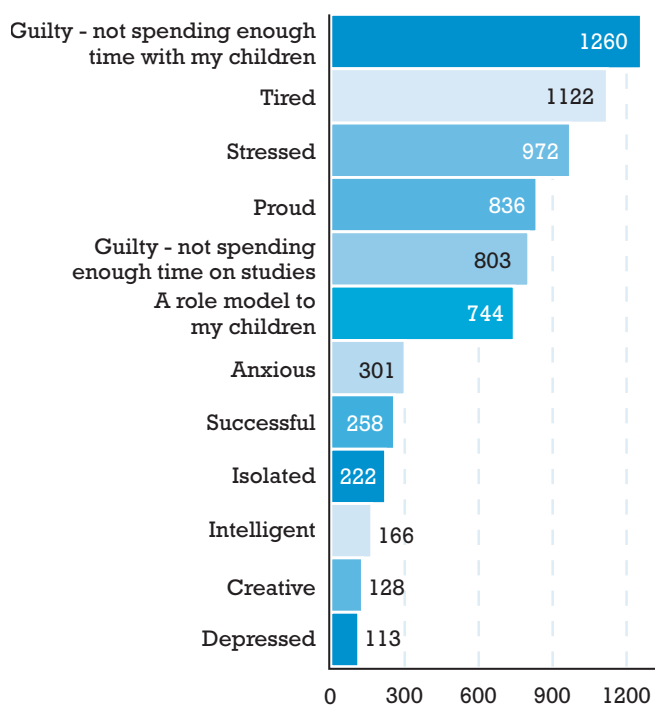


Pregnancy and breastfeeding

639 survey respondents (29%) said they had been pregnant during their studies. When we asked them if they felt their university or college had been supportive of them during this period, 41% said yes and 59% said no. We asked all survey respondents whether there were dedicated breastfeeding areas in their institutions; the vast majority (80%) did not know, 17% said there were not, and less than 1% said there were (19 respondents).

Overall Experience

Survey question: How do you regularly feel as a result of combining parenthood with studying?



The results displayed in the chart above were consistent across all categories within the sample. The only notable difference was that male parents were less likely to feel guilty for not spending time with their children as a result of being a student parent. Overall 58% of respondents selected this answer, compared with 42% of male respondents. The most popular response to this question from male parents was 'tired', selected by 50% (129).

Survey question: Looking back, do you feel you were given all the information you needed to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent in relation to:

Answer options	Yes	To some extent	No	Response count
Choice of college/university	911	645	536	2092
Course choice	974	568	536	2078
Financial entitlements	399	744	943	2086
Childcare	304	673	1052	2029
Answered question				2119
Skipped question				48

Respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely to say that they felt they were given sufficient information to make an informed choice in relation to course and institution choice (35% and 37% respectively).

Three quarters of all student parent respondents felt that on balance, participation in further or higher education had been a positive experience for their family (75%; 1634). There was no significant variation in this result for BME or lone parent respondents.

We asked students what the one thing would be that would most improve their experience as a student parent. The majority of the answers focused on finances: 13% said higher benefits or student support; 11% cheaper childcare or increased childcare funding; 8% funding for unregistered childcare; 7% guaranteed childcare funding; 5% funding for travel; 4% an easy-to-use central source of funding information; and 4% better financial advice. Others focused on financial processes, with 7% picking monthly instalments of student loan, and 4% not having to change in an out of benefit and student support systems throughout the year. In terms of academic issues, 9% selected increased flexibility with assessment deadlines and 7% selected early provision of timetables.

Appendix C

List of project interviews (2007–08)

- 22 November Kate Goddard, Policy and Research Officer, Daycare Trust
- 18 January Kate Bell, Head of Policy and Research, Gingerbread
- 5 February Christian Marriott, Student Financial Support, Sheffield College
- 5 February John Muir, Advice Centre Manager, Hallam Union
- 6 February Deborah Laycock, Student Adviser, Leeds College of Technology
- 6 February Ann Sargent, Guidance Worker, Leeds University Union
- 21 February Claire Callender, Professor of Higher Education, Birkbeck University
- 29 February Paul Norman, Advice Centre Manager, Manchester Metropolitan Students' Union
- 29 February Faye Sherington, Student Support Coordinator, University of Salford
- 5 March Emma Wainwright, Lecturer in Human Geography, and Elodie Marandet, Research Officer, Brunel University
- 5 March Rebecca Main, Student Advice Centre Manager, Brunel Students' Union (left)
- 6 March Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Research Fellow and Associate Tutor, University of Sussex
- 29 May Alison Urquhart and Nicola Summers, Student Advisers, University of Strathclyde Students' Association
- 22 September Hilary Land, Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Fellow, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol
- 13 October Connie Craig, Student Advice Centre Manager (Financial Adviser), Queen's University Belfast Students' Union

Appendix D

Focus groups (2008)

- 7 May Norwich City College (In person)
- 28 May Leicester College (In person)
- 30 May Kilmarnock College (In person)
- 3 June–July South East Regional College (Online)
- 8 June–7 July University of Leeds (Online)
- 13 June Hackney Community College (In person)
- 20 June The College, Ystrad Mynach (In person)
- 4 July–15 August Heriot-Watt University (Online)
- 10 August–19 September Swansea Metropolitan University (Online)
- 15 October London Southank University (In person)

Appendix E

List of attendees at research roundtable (8 December 2008)

- Jayne Aldridge, AMOSSHE and Thames Valley University
- Robert Baughan, Unison
- Kate Bell, Gingerbread
- Suzanne Berry, The Nuffield Foundation
- Sara Bosley, NIACE
- Connie Craig, Queens University Belfast Students' Union
- Sarah Guise, Equality Challenge Unit
- Paul Norman, Manchester Metropolitan Students' Union
- Chris Weavers, NASUWT
- Additional critical readers:**
- Maxine Hill, Daycare Trust



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